PAGES MISSING IN THE BOOK

E797-3

Estes
The inconsistant flame
$2.50

E797-3

Keep Your Card in This Pocket

Books will be issued only on presentation of proper library cards.

Unless labeled otherwise, books may be retained for two weeks. Borrowers finding books marked, defaced or mutilated are expected to report same at library desk; otherwise the last borrower will be held responsible for all imperfections discovered.

The card holder is responsible for all books drawn on this card.

Penalty for over-due books 2c a day plus cost of notices.

Lost cards and change of residence must be reported promptly.

THE SCHOOL DISTRICT OF KANSAS CITY, MISSOURI

Public Library
Kansas City, Mo.

Keep Your Card in This Pocket


KANSAS CITY, MO PUBLIC LIBRARY
0 0001 0310134 1

The INCONSTANT FLAME

The INCONSTANT FLAME

By

HARLOW ESTES

New York
DODD, MEAD & COMPANY
1943

THE INCONSTANT FLAME

Published in *The Red Book* as

YES IS A LITTLE WORD

COPYRIGHT, 1943,
BY HARLOW ESTES

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED
NO PART OF THIS BOOK MAY BE REPRODUCED IN ANY FORM
WITHOUT PERMISSION IN WRITING FROM THE PUBLISHER

PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

The INCONSTANT FLAME

1

As soon as Lucas came and put his arms around her, she would be all right. She would be able to stop thinking ahead and she would grow warm again and this nervous trembling, humiliating and uncontrollable, would cease. A few hours of quiet and security, with him, would help her to face the coming months.

He would be good, wouldn't he? Since it was the last evening, too late to change anything, too late to argue. He would be gentle with her. Wouldn't he? What she needed was to be held quietly and kindly, talked to and teased a little and comforted and reassured and called Wee Willie and his little toad. He rarely called her by her name except when she was a block away and then "Edweeeeeeeeena!" carried farther than anything.

Where she was going, she wouldn't even be Edwina. Only Miss Voorhis this and Miss Voorhis that.

The trembling was like an ague, and she was cold to her marrow, but it was only nerves. It would stop when he came. If only he would come soon! It was too early to expect him. He might be very late. He could tell time as well as anybody but he seldom bothered to look at clocks. He wasn't even

consistently late; with an always-late person you knew what to expect; sometimes, when it was inconvenient to have him early, in he walked.

But oftener he was late. How he managed classes and dormitory meals she couldn't imagine; probably, being gregarious, he moved with the crowd.

The bell rang. She dashed to the push button and out into the corridor. But it couldn't possibly be Lucas, unless he had caught an earlier bus or bummed a ride. It was only some boy selling magazines, or the tailor bringing back Francy's dress, or maybe a special delivery for Francy from Scott or a wire from Scott to say he was well again and on his way home.

Let it be a wire, a good wire, if it isn't Lucas, she thought, not praying, but wishing. Wishing hard.

She walked slowly toward the stairs. The corridor was a long dim tunnel. The window at the end of it, over the stairs, was a bright yellow oblong of late-afternoon September sunlight. Whoever had rung would rise up presently against that yellow brightness. She stopped halfway along the corridor. She would go halfway to meet disappointment, but no farther.

She listened. There wasn't a sound. He might be wearing those crepe-soled beach shoes, left over from summer, that he called his little cat feet. He would be coming up the four long flights in noiseless leaps. He nearly always ran up stairs, any stairs, and when he reached the top he didn't even breathe hard. Nothing shortened his breath; not rage or terror or love. But had he ever felt terror? She wondered.

It couldn't be Lucas. He would be up by now. She shut her eyes and opened them and there he was! Oh, darling! Early!

There he was. He didn't wave. He wasn't looking toward her. He was just standing there at the top of the stairs as if to catch his breath after the long climb. He was fumbling in his pockets. He took out a cigarette and lighted it and dropped the burnt match over the railing, leaning to see where it fell, hoping, no doubt, that it would land on somebody's head. He straightened up again, narrow and tall against the yellow window, bare-headed, and the sun made his crest of hair bright silver. He strolled toward her, leisurely, oblivious, looking about him, looking anywhere except at her, sauntering as if the corridor were a grassy lane.

Well! she thought, exasperated. Take your time. Have a nice stroll. Our last evening together from now till Christmas but don't let that distress you. Clearly, it doesn't. Pick a daisy for your buttonhole. Pull a grassblade and whistle on it; I hope it cuts your lip. Where in the name of goodness do you think you are?

He came up to her, his bright light eyes fixed on a point above and beyond her head. His thin triangular face was as bland as cream and the color of dark honey. She stood her ground and he walked straight into her and bumped her so hard that she rocked on her three-inch heels. He said, "I beg your pardon," with such politeness that she wondered, frantically, if he could be tight. On their last evening! Would he? It happened only at major crises. Well, this was one. Her leaving him tomorrow. The first long separation.

Was he? Twice she had seen him tight and he had walked and talked with perfect self-possession up to the moment of total eclipse. No sign of anything wrong except an unnatural politeness and a rather studied dignity, and then he just fell down and slept for a dozen hours, or longer.

He put a hand out, blindly. It touched her hair. His long

fingers found her ear, moved down her cheek to her chin, dropped to her shoulder.

"What have we here?"

He shook her gently, and sighed.

"I know. I've come up against it before. It's that damned little immoveable object."

He wasn't tight. It was some sort of act. He wouldn't be capable of innuendo. He might be. He was capable of anything. She reached up quickly and pulled his head down to her level. She kissed his mouth and backed away, indignant and relieved. Not a whiff of anything except tobacco.

"Why, toad!" he said, and his hand on her shoulder brought her back to him. His eyes were full of little sparkles. "You sweet. You almost never do that of your own accord."

Toad because she was little and once she had tried on one of Elise's wide-brimmed hats and he had roared with laughter and said she was a toad under a mushroom. Not a pet name she would have chosen. But there were worse ones. Elise, in the home, was Sloppy, which fitted as her clothes did not.

"I thought you were plastered, Lucas. I had to find out."

The blood rushed into his face. He turned maroon when he was angry, a shocking color with his light eyebrows and hair.

He grasped her elbows and lifted her from the floor. She hated that. She had never let him guess how much she hated it. He would have done it oftener. He set her down again so hard that her high heels jarred her spine. He marched around her and away from her to the open door of Francy's apartment and disappeared within. As angry as that, and for nothing. But it wasn't for nothing. He was strung up tight, as she was, about tomorrow. Ready to break.

His spurts of temper never lasted long, but the suddenness

of them and the violence scared her. She had lived, always, with self-restrained older people. She didn't like being yelled at. She didn't like violence. Lucas and his younger brothers and Elise all seemed to enjoy a good shouting row; it stimulated them.

If I were bigger, she thought. Tougher. Quicker. If I knew how to fight back and then forget it. But I'll never learn.

She would have to learn, because he wanted a lot of response, whether in fighting or love-making. She would have to learn to be what he wanted. Scratch and bite the way his sister did. Once he had dragged Elise across a room by her hair. Batty and Fitz he knocked down and sat on when they gave trouble, and Hendry, the youngest, he turned over his knee. They asked for it, of course.

"Edweeeeeeeena!"

"I'm coming!" she said, and ran, because if he bellowed like that he would wake up Francy, and Francy, aroused too soon, would be unpleasant, more so than usual.

Lucas was flat on his back on the mulberry sofa, his feet up on the high padded arm.

"You ought to have more sense, Wee Willie. I get drunk only when I'm desperate."

He didn't look desperate. He looked completely relaxed and as if he owned the place. He took instant possession of any room he entered. All winter, when he called for her at the Martineaus', it had embarrassed her horribly, the way he walked in without ringing and if she wasn't ready picked the most comfortable chair and helped himself to the Professor's cigarettes and turned on the radio and put his feet up. If Mrs. Martineau drifted by, he didn't a bit mind explaining, as he had to every time, that he was waiting for her student kitchen help, not for her distinguished husband. Mrs. Mar-

tineau had seen so many undergraduates in her house and in her time that she had long since given up attempting to remember which was which. The Professor remembered Lucas all too well as one of his most infuriating students, one who had brains and wouldn't use them and just squeaked by.

Nothing embarrassed Lucas. How pleasant to be made like that. It wasn't all effrontery. He expected to be liked; he expected to be welcome anywhere; usually he was.

There was an inch of ash on his cigarette. In a moment he would scorch his shirt or the sofa. She set an ashtray on his chest, and he caught her wrist and pulled her down to sit on the narrow edge that he wasn't occupying. It was a relief to have him sweet-tempered again. His half-shut eyes glinted at her through his thick silvery lashes. Nobody else had such brilliant eyes except his mother and hers were black, and black brilliance was different. His smile was different from Lydia's, too, although his mouth was the same, big and thin-lipped; her smile glittered but his was sweet and sometimes malicious, the lips pressed firmly together, their corners lifting only a little.

"Lyddy missed you," he said. "Her feelings are deeply permanently injured."

Edwina laughed. If there was anybody who never had hurt feelings it was his mother.

"With a full house, she never missed me."

"She did! You and I are her favorite children and you know it."

Which was nonsense. Lydia's favorites were the ones in sight. But it was heart-warming to be accepted so completely by a family even before you married into it, especially if you had nobody of your own except a lone Voorhis cousin. And cousinship wasn't very close if you hadn't grown up together

And nobody, recently, could feel close to Francy.

"Any last-minute news?"

"Let's see," said Lucas. "Well. Fitz has a new girl. This one's Wellesley."

"I don't call that news. He has a new girl every few days. It's funny he should be so changeable and Batty so faithful."

"I was just like Fitz till a year ago," said Lucas, "and it isn't fidelity with Batty; it's pure self-interest and laziness; Justine lives near; it's no trouble getting her home."

"Did Elise wheedle a new coat out of your father?"

"Not yet. But she will."

Yes, she would. Mr. Pancoast was too easy-going. Where on earth was the money coming from to meet this appalling winter? His salary wasn't very large, and the food bills alone were staggering because Lydia entertained so lavishly, and there was the new furnace to be paid for, and the family car, which Batty had tried to wrap around a tree; and tuition and dormitory board for three, and Elise's board in New York and those fabulously expensive lessons which were nothing but a whim and a good excuse to get away from home because she would never in this world be good enough to make a living at dancing; a show girl, maybe; she had the height and the beauty; but dancing, never.

"You could just as well have gone home with me, toad."

"Darling, I couldn't. I had to box my books and send them off and I had to wash and iron and mend. Tedious jobs. You know I can't work in your house with people swarming around. And I had to buy new winter clothes."

There aren't any bargain basements in your town.

"Lyddy would have helped you. She loves to shop."

Yes. She would have bought things I couldn't afford and charged them to your father, who can't afford them, either,

and I would have felt guilty every time I put them on. And they would have been the wrong things, too, the kind I love, pretty and fluffy and impractical, all wrong for a schoolteacher.

"I don't see why you didn't do your tedious jobs before. You had the whole summer."

"You know what the summer was like," she said. "When I wasn't in the Martineaus' kitchen or out with you, I was typing. I type so slowly, it took forever; but I had to earn money somehow to start this fall with, and I had to do a careful job after Professor Martineau got me the manuscript. And then last week I had to help her pack and close the house. She'd have left it wide open and gone off to Mexico with nothing but her cello."

I'm going to miss them both, she realized suddenly. Four years in their house, and most of the time they were too preoccupied to know I was alive, and if I met her on the street tomorrow she'd ask me my name. But they were always gentle and polite. And I'm used to them. I'm going to miss them.

I'm going to miss Francy, although she's grown so hateful lately, and Scott, although I never liked him and he's been away so long that it seems natural for him not to be here. But the four of us were together at least one evening a week all winter and spring.

I'm going to miss the campus and the town and the Museum and the Botanical Garden and even the little park back of the Public Library, all the public places I've walked in and sat in with you and talked and held hands in with you. And especially this apartment where we've come so often.

"I nearly forgot. Hendry sent you some snapshots."

He rolled over to get at a pocket and the ashtray emptied itself in her lap. She went to the fireplace and brushed and

brushed her new, good, durable, inconspicuous, dark brown wool skirt; the schoolteacher dress that was well cut and a little longish to make her, if possible, look tall. To give her, if possible, a severe imposing look to counteract her round-eyed round-cheeked babyish face. Lucas liked her little and he thought she was pretty and that was fine but school boards and principals and parents of highschoolers weren't so easily pleased.

"Here," he said, bringing the snapshots to her. "They're terrible."

They always were. Hendry's camera was a good one, a hand-me-down from Lucas, and Hendry knew how to take good pictures but he liked them candid, the worst moment, the least flattering angle. Because he loved and admired her, he took views of her biting into a hamburger, her cheeks bunched like a squirrel's; balancing on one leg to empty sand from a shoe; shapeless in a too-big borrowed bathing suit polka-dotted with moth holes; stooping, principally rump, to pet Canfield, the cat.

Inspecting the snapshots under a lamp, she was pained. She hadn't much vanity but all of it suffered. And even the group pictures were disappointing because Lucas was blurred in every one; he always moved his head or shouted something as the camera clicked.

"Yes, they're terrible."

But Hendry loved her. He really did, and it wasn't calf love, either, because he hadn't reached that yet; it was straight hero-worship, wholly undeserved but very sweet and to be cherished. She went out of her way to be nice to him because she was fond of him, and when she thought of the child that she and Lucas would certainly have some day, she always saw him, not as a baby, ever, but as about twelve, the age of

Hendry, and companionable and lively and intelligent and affectionate like Hendry, loving her in the same all-out uncomplicated undemanding way which was not at all the way in which Lucas loved her.

"Where do you want to eat?" Lucas asked. "Why don't we blow ourselves and have dinner at the Crown?"

The Crown! But that was where you went to celebrate. This was hardly an evening for celebration. It was more like the end of the world.

"Oh," she said, "I planned for us to eat in. I have everything."

"Okay," he said.

He was walking up and down the pale green rug, scowling like murder. She sat down by the fireplace, her knees weak. It was awful to be afraid to talk about tomorrow when she wanted to cry out things like, "Darling, darling, you will write often, won't you?" and "Darling, you will go on loving me, won't you?" Silly things. And she couldn't risk uttering them, because what if he said, "Don't go. Give up the damned job and stay with me"? It was the last minute and too late to change anything, but what if he sensed her misery and thought she was weakening and began to argue again?

He ought to help her a little instead of trying to break down what commonsense she had. Why didn't he pick her up and comfort her and say that of course she could handle mere highschool freshmen and sophomores after a year of managing a problem child like him? Only of course she didn't manage him. She didn't try to. She never would try to. She wasn't going to be that kind of wife. She didn't want the kind of husband who would allow it or accept it without noticing.

And he wasn't a problem child. He wasn't any sort of

child. He was twenty-three and a man, two years older than she was, and much smarter than she was even if he was taking six years to get through the university; and he ought to want to make things easier for her to bear instead of harder; if he loved her, and she was sure he did, he ought to want to take care of her a little. Well, perhaps he would, later, when they were married and when he was through the university. They would have been married before now if he hadn't changed his mind so many times about what he wanted to do for a living, switching from engineering to forestry to dairy farming to engineering again. Six years to get any sort of degree. And a year out between highschool and college; but perhaps that had been a good idea; he had finished highschool young. Six years, and when he was graduated next June there would be a year in the Army but of course that wasn't his fault, it was the fault of the world.

"Lucas!" she had to say it. She couldn't keep it back any longer. "You will write to me often, won't you?"

He gave her a quick scowling glance.

"I'm no good at letters."

But I have to have them! Please, darling.

She didn't say it. He would write to her. Not often, perhaps, but once in a while. She had to have letters from him to keep her alive until Christmas. She had never had one from him. She had never needed one because a week was the longest they had been apart; this past week he had phoned her every evening. But he mustn't phone all the time when she was in Midas; long distance cost too much. Besides, letters could be read over and over and kept under a pillow at night and carried around in a pocket daytimes.

Her new dress had a pocket. She slipped her hand into it and touched the lucky stone that Hendry had given her; he

had picked it up at the corn roast in August, her last visit home; it was small enough to carry in a pocket without its making a bulge; it was gray and had a stripe around it and was shaped rather like a chicken's heart. She was going to keep it with her tomorrow and Monday and in the weeks to come, not because she was superstitious but because she was going to need any reminders she could get that somewhere, by somebody, she was loved. A lucky stone was better than nothing. A letter from Lucas would be better than anything.

He had stopped pacing. He had flung himself down on the sofa again and was resting on the small of his back and the back of his neck with his long legs stretching out a mile in front of him. He was smoking again.

"The first time I ever saw you," she said, "you were sitting just there and just like that with smoke coming out of your eyes and ears and nose, and do you know, did I ever tell you, what I thought?"

"That I was a solid brass incense burner."

Solid brass. Yes.

"I thought you were Francy's new husband."

He sat up with a jerk and strangled on smoke and coughed himself crimson.

"You never did!"

"Yes, I did. Why wouldn't I? I'd never seen you or Scott either, to know you, and I walked in and there he was, perfectly formal and rigid and polite, with a coat on and company manners, like a caller, and you were sprawled out in shirtsleeves as if you owned the place."

He laughed and laughed.

"You never told me."

"I guess I never thought of it again, until just now."

Just now. I'm doing what you do in the last minute before

death, because tomorrow is a little death. Any parting is. I'm remembering lots of little things I'd forgotten about us. Because tomorrow I'm going to die a little.

He swooped upon her and caught her up and sat down in her chair, holding her on his lap. She had wanted to be held, but not quite so tightly.

"It makes me goddam sore," he said, "to know you were practically under my feet the whole of your freshman year and I never saw you and went off to study forestry when I ought to have known I'd loathe a lonesome job like that if I tried it for long; and the farm was a silly idea, too; Scott talked me into it; he was brought up to like it, but not me, although I might have liked it if I'd had you with me."

"But I mightn't," she said, smiling. "A wood range and a pump and four men to cook and wash for."

"You would have liked being married to me."

She didn't answer. He gave her a little shake.

"Wouldn't you?"

She had wanted to be kissed, but not like that. She was afraid of that sort of kissing. She couldn't breathe. She couldn't think. She struggled.

"Be still," he said, against her mouth.

"No. Put me down."

He stood up and let her drop.

"You don't like being kissed that way, do you?"

"Not now."

"And why not now?"

He should know why not. He did know. Perhaps it was just as well they were to be apart for the winter, since they couldn't be married. Just as well.

"It's never the right time for us, is it?" he said. He was furious with her. She knew it. His eyes seemed to have no

color; the light gray was burned up in terrifying brightness. "You never let yourself go, do you? Even while I'm kissing you I can hear your brain ticking away like a damned clock."

She jumped. The porcelain clock on the mantel said ten of six.

"I forgot about waking Francy."

"What do you mean, wake her? Do you mean she's in there sleeping? Now? What for? You said she was going out for the evening!"

"She is going out but not until six. I told you on the phone. You said you wouldn't get here till six. You were an hour early. I'm glad you were."

"I wasn't early! I thumbed a ride and the old fool drove ten miles an hour and it must have been seven before I got here."

She pointed to the clock.

"It's slow," he said. "It's stopped."

"No, it hasn't. It's right. Don't touch it!"

She spoke too late. He had shaken it violently, held it to his ear, and slammed it down in gloomy triumph.

"I told you it had stopped!" he said.

It had all right.

"Well, what are you waiting for?" he asked impatiently. "If Fran's in there sleeping, go and rout her out. Wake her up and tell her to make it snappy!"

As if he owned the place. As if Francy, who lived in it,

2

THE bedroom was dark and perfectly still. She groped her way to the dressing table and switched on one of the white-shaded lamps.

Francy was lying on her side, one thin bare arm outside the blanket, the other under her head. Her brown hair was spread out in a fan over the pillow, the curly ends falling over her face. How could she sleep so much? Not only all night but long naps at almost any time during the day. Nobody needed that much sleep. And did most people lie so deathly quiet as if they were drugged?

Impossible to say, if you had never until this week shared a bedroom with anyone except Elise, and Elise was a terror; she thrashed about all night and flopped over and over, with a great creaking of bed-springs, and battled with her pillow and muttered and groaned and carried on conversations and occasionally left her bed and walked around, all without waking. By morning her covers were in a tangle. Francy's covers were as smooth as if she hadn't once changed position.

"Francy," Edwina whispered it, very gently. "Francy."

Unpleasant, waking somebody whose only peace was in unconsciousness. For Francy, waking meant remembering

that her husband wasn't in the other bed.

"Francy. It's nearly six o'clock."

"I'm not asleep," said Francy. "You needn't creep about and whisper."

Querulous. In that voice the simplest statement became complaint or criticism or reproach.

How could I sleep with Lucas shouting? What does he think he's doing, calling the hogs?"

There was no good answering. Whatever response you made was likely to be the wrong one.

The whole week had been like that, off and on. The only peaceful intervals had been when Francy talked about Scott. She could talk on about him for hours. It was astonishing that she could find so much to say. It was astonishing that she should be willing to tell so much; a little embarrassing. But it seemed to comfort her; a kind of re-living in telling.

In between times the irritability had shown itself.

I wish I hadn't asked her to take me in, Edwina thought. I wish I'd had the courage to stay alone in the Martineau house. But it was so gloomy, all boarded up.

I've tried not to be a nuisance to her. I haven't cost her anything and I've kept my belongings out of her way. I bought all the food and cooked it and coaxed her to eat; she said it was the first decent food she had had all summer.

Well, it's only one more night.

"Shall I turn on the other lights, Francy?"

"I can't dress in the dark!" said Francy waspishly.

That sort of thing, over and over, the whole week. She used to like me, Edwina thought. She seemed to. But since Scott left, she hasn't liked anybody. It's too bad that unhappiness should make a person hateful.

I don't want to hate her. I met Lucas through her. I owe

her that. I might never have met him. It's a big university.

She turned on all the lights. They were all white-shaded, and the bedroom had a cold look at night or even in full sunlight dead white and ice-blue, and Francy's face on the pillow, as she turned over and pushed her hair back, was blue-white and ghastly. Even her full lips had a blue tinge. With her hair pushed back, and no make-up on, she looked less herself, more Voorhis, and enough like Edwina's father to twist the heart. The same curiously flattened long oval face with a nose well-shaped but too small for it and the brow and chin too prominently thrust outward. The brown eyes, too, very soft, made large by the curling lashes. A highly individual face like that kept appearing in a family. It had skipped over Edwina and over Francy's own father.

"Don't go," said Francy.

It could have been appealing, a plea for company while she dressed. It wasn't. Peevish, reproachful, like a sick child.

"I suppose I must drag myself out."

"Not on our account," Edwina answered quickly. After a reluctant moment, she said, persuasively because she was reluctant, "If you feel wretched, don't get up. I'll bring you a tray. You can eat and then go back to sleep."

"Sleep!" exclaimed Francy. "Sleep? With Lucas bawling in the next room?"

"We'll go out."

"You needn't. I'm going out myself. I said I would and I will. But don't rush me."

If she were really sick, Edwina thought, I could be more patient. Maybe I could.

Maybe she really is sick.

"Francy, have you been to a doctor lately?"

"Not since last winter when I went to every doctor in the whole damned town."

"You did? I didn't know you were ill last winter."

"I wasn't. I wanted a child, that was all. Or rather, Scott wanted one. I didn't but I would have gone through anything to please him. I went to all the specialists and they said I had something out of place and it was about one chance in a hundred."

"Francy! Was that all they said?"

"Oh, I could be packed or something and stay in bed a year but there was just as much chance, or as little, if I didn't bother, so I didn't."

"I'm terribly sorry."

"I'm not," said Francy.

She stepped out of bed, fragile and tall in her long satin nightgown, as tall as Elise, almost as tall as Lucas.

"I'd like to have a child to please Scott and to prove to his father that I'm healthy and perfectly normal even if I don't look like a blowsy milkmaid. He's a horrid old man. He told Scott I might be tubercular. I had a cough because I'd been smoking a lot and Scott couldn't explain that to Mr. Collier because the old man is death on tobacco. And of course I'm thin. I always have been and always will be. Daddy says you can't fatten a Voorhis. He's very skinny, and wasn't your father, too? You're not but there isn't anything in the least Voorhis about you and you can thank your stars that there isn't."

She picked up her hairbrush and let it drop again with a bang. She went to work on her hair, bunching a few curls high over her forehead, tying the rest back with a black ribbon to make a bunch on her neck. She had always called defiant attention to her odd looks, doing her hair in such a way

as to narrow her face and lengthen her slender long neck, wearing tight plain dresses and tall hats that exaggerated her height and extreme slenderness, wearing colors that brought out the blue in her skin, magenta and purple, and shades she called blue mold and rotten pink.

She did look ill. But hadn't she always looked so before the make-up was on? And that sick-child voice; it had always been a childish voice, hadn't it? High and light, but with a certain sweetness and gaiety. But perhaps that had been the laughter mixing in. She had always, until this summer, laughed a great deal while she talked.

"Oh, God, I wish I didn't have to go out!"

She had offered to. It had been her own idea, leaving the place to them for their last evening. Generous. But what was the good of a generous gesture if a little later you showed that it was begrudged?

"Have dinner with us," said Edwina. She had to say it. She knew that Lucas would be wild; he would take it out on Francy and her both. "I have enough for three."

"Spend an evening cooped up with a couple of lovebirds? I wouldn't be paid to," Francy said.

"Did you ever see any lovebirds?" asked Edwina. "Mrs. Martineau brought home a pair winter before last and they did nothing but squawk and peck. It was disillusioning."

Francy, spreading magenta lipstick on her mouth, made no reply. She was deft and fastidious with make-up; she still was; but she went through the motions listlessly, as if only from habit, not as if she cared in the least how she looked or hoped that anyone else would notice or care.

"Scott and I never quarreled," she said.

Speaking of what? Lovebirds? Or just coming back to Scott, as she always did? She couldn't talk for two minutes

without coming back to him.

"Are you having dinner with friends?" Edwina asked. After a week of hearing about Scott, she was pretty tired of him.

"Friends!" said Francy. "I haven't any friends."

Us, thought Edwina. We're about all. You dropped everybody else when you married. But you hung onto us. And now you're doing your best to alienate us.

It occurred to her, suddenly and painfully, that perhaps Francy hadn't really cared for them, ever; that she had held onto them only because Lucas was the only friend Scott seemed able to tolerate or perhaps the only one who could tolerate him, and he had tolerated Edwina because she belonged to Lucas. He had never showed any particular fondness for Lucas but he had liked to argue with him about the state of the world, and Lucas would argue with anybody about anything till the cows came home.

Had Francy stopped caring about everybody except Scott when she married?

But that doesn't make sense, Edwina thought. Knowing Lucas, and loving him, has made me fonder of other people. It isn't just that through him I've met a lot of attractive people. It's a difference in me. My heart is bigger. I'm not so shut into myself. And Francy used to like us. I know she did. She was always after us to come over.

"I look hideous, don't I?" said Francy, leaning close to the mirror. "I look as if I were dying. Well, I am. Bleeding to death inside."

Often they would have preferred to be by themselves, but at least once a week she had called up and coaxed and insisted. Please wouldn't they come and cheer up Scott who had studied until he was stupefied? Wouldn't they come and

calm him down, he had been listening to the news broadcasts and was frantic; wouldn't Lucas convince him that it wasn't our war and we'd be of more use if we stayed out? Please wouldn't they come over and try a new mathematical game she had found; Scott was too tense to read or talk; he and Lucas could try the game; it was too complicated for weak women's minds; she and Edwina would sit in a corner and talk quietly and not disturb them.

That sort of thing, over and over, week after week.

But always for Scott. To please Scott, to calm him down, to entertain him.

"You'll have to get rid of Lucas by midnight," said Francy. "I won't stay out later than that. I refuse to give up my night's sleep for anybody."

She was dressing with careless speed. She snatched a dress from a hanger, any dress, the first her hand touched. She jerked it on. Dull blue with huge faded purple flowers printed on it. She went to the mirror to put on her hat.

But she used to like me, Edwina thought. Didn't she? If she didn't, why did she keep on being nice to me after she came and looked me up the first time? Before either of us knew that either Scott or Lucas existed. She hadn't much in common with me except a last name. Four years older than I, and all she cared about was getting married; all she talked about was the various men she went out with and what was wrong with them and what had been wrong with the men she'd been in love with before I knew her. She told me things about herself that she might better have kept to herself. Perhaps I was just an ear for her to pour confidences into, and any ear would have served; or perhaps she enjoyed shocking me a little; I was so much younger and so much less experienced.

"You needn't worry about Lucas staying late, Francy. I have to get a good night's sleep myself. I have a long trip ahead of me tomorrow."

That ought to remind her that she and Scott weren't the only people who loved each other and had to be apart for months and months. It wouldn't hurt her to take a little interest in somebody besides herself and Scott.

"You're really going tomorrow?"

"Yes. I have to."

"You don't have to."

"But I do, Francy. School doesn't start until Monday but I have to be in Midas on Saturday morning for the first teachers' meeting and it will take me all day tomorrow to reach the place. It isn't so far away in miles; if I could make the trip by car, or by crow, I wouldn't have to leave so early. But Batty smashed up Mr. Pancoast's car so Lucas can't drive me up. I must go by train."

She hoped Francy wouldn't take that as a hint to lend her car that stood idle in the garage week after week. It hadn't been meant as a hint. But perhaps she would offer?

"I start at nine in the morning and won't reach Midas till night. The connections are terrible. The nine o'clock stops at every cowshed and then I have a two-hour wait for a train that stops whenever a beetle crosses the track, or so I've been told, and then I have another long wait for a bus that runs on alternate Fridays at four or something like that. I'd take the night train which is more direct but it stops at Midas Junction, four miles from the town, and there wouldn't be anyone to meet me at two in the morning and even if there were I couldn't expect my landlady to get up from her warm bed at such an hour and admit me, when she's never even met me."

Francy was listening. Really listening. Was she interested? In the whole week she hadn't asked one question about the teaching position or about Midas or about the place where Edwina was to board. She hadn't asked whether Edwina was scared about taking her first responsible job or whether it tore her heart to go away so far from Lucas. She had talked about herself and Scott, and Edwina had listened.

"You're really going."

She had turned from the mirror. The brim of her purple hat flared high, making her unnecessarily tall and making her haggard and older than twenty-five and a little grotesque but startling. Eye-catching. Anyone would look twice and go on looking.

"I thought that when it came to the last minute, you'd give it up. You're not very much in love with Lucas, are you? I suppose you think you are, but you aren't, you know."

Sheer hatefulness.

"I love him very much."

"Oh no, you don't."

It would be silly to go on saying, "But I do, I do," and have Francy keep answering, "Oh no, you don't." It would be too much like the way children contradicted each other with " 'Tis," " 'Tisn't," " 'Tis," " 'Tisn't," until their breath gave out.

"Because if you loved him," said Francy, "you wouldn't go away from him tomorrow and stay away for months and months. You couldn't do it."

"Scott left you," Edwina said.

"But he didn't want to leave me!" Francy cried. "That was entirely different!"

"I don't know why it was. I don't want to go away from Lucas."

"But Scott was ill! He had to go away where he could be absolutely quiet in the country, and I could have gone with him but he thought I'd be uncomfortable on a cattle ranch and he thought I'd worry about him if he didn't show a quick improvement and that seeing me uncomfortable and anxious about him would make him uncomfortable and anxious and it would slow up his recovery. It wasn't true, but you can't argue with a sick man. Not when it's a sickness of the nerves. And how do I know he wasn't right about it? I worry more about him when I'm away from him but he can't see me worry. Only how can he get well without me? People in love oughtn't to be apart."

"The point is," said Edwina, "that he left you although he didn't want to. I don't want to go away from Lucas but I have to. I haven't any choice. I tried to get a job here but the city teaching jobs are in the pockets of the politicians and the competition for suburban school jobs is so stiff that you have to have pull, or several degrees, or years of experience. And English teachers are a dime a dozen anywhere. I wouldn't have had a chance in Midas, even, I expect, if Mr. Wace, the principal, hadn't once known Father and remembered him, and if the girl they'd hired already hadn't decided at the last minute to be married; they don't employ married women, and it was so late that they couldn't be choosy."

"You don't have to teach," said Francy.

Anybody would think she was feeble-minded.

"I have to eat, Francy. Not much, but a little something at regular intervals. Lucas can't support me for another two years, and I'm not going to ask his father to. Mr. Pancoast has five children and they're all still dependent on him and this year his expenses will be frightful, with Fitz and Batty entering college before Lucas is through. Lucas has cost his

father more than all the other children put together, he's changed his mind so often about what he wanted to do. That dairy farm experiment; you know about that; Scott's father paid half the bills; it was a dead loss; but Mr. Collier is well off and has only Scott to support so it was all right for Scott to experiment and change his mind and decide to come back and work for a doctor's degree; it was all right for him to marry while he was still going to school. And you have your own money. But Lucas and I haven't anything."

"You don't have to teach," Francy said again. "You could find something else to do, something around here. You could if you wanted to."

So that was what she meant.

"Typing theses?" Edwina asked. "Clerking in the dime store? Kitchen work?"

She was slow to anger, and when it finally burst inside her, it made her sick. It left her sick and shaken for hours afterward. She tried to avoid it. But the week with Francy had been a strain.

"I suppose I could have asked the Martineaus to keep me on, if they hadn't gone to Mexico for his sabbatical. Yes, I could have asked them to keep me, I suppose, although jobs like that in faculty homes are supposed to go to undergraduate girls who really need them."

Her head began to throb. She was trembling again, as she had in the afternoon, but she wasn't cold. She was boiling.

"I daresay you're right. If I loved Lucas much I'd marry him tomorrow and get a job as somebody's cook or second maid. There's a shortage of domestic help; the munition plants have snapped up the more intelligent servants; and I've had four years of kitchen experience; I'm slow, and not an expert cook, but at least I'm honest and thorough. I'd be

presentable enough in a cap and apron and I could see Lucas on my Thursdays and every other Sunday afternoon. But he'd have to learn to call at the back door; that would be hard on him, he's so used to marching in at the front."

She could have saved her breath. All Francy said was, "You're pretty cold-blooded, aren't you?"

"I don't think so. Sensible, that's all. I have to be."

Not cold-blooded now. I'm burning up.

"Sensible and cold-blooded," Francy said. "They come to the same thing. You aren't capable of being in love. Not what I mean by love. Probably you never will be. Doubtless you're just as well off. You'll never know what you're missing. You'll marry when you get good and ready and not before, and if not Lucas, if he gets tired of waiting for you, then somebody else who'll love you and eat his heart out trying to reach your heart and never touching it. You'll marry because you're very pretty and Lucas or some man is certain to want you, but you'll never break your heart over any man because you're sensible. You'll never suffer the tortures of the damned. You'll be safe and comfortable. But I don't envy you. I wouldn't be you for anything."

She pressed her hands against her breast.

"I'd scrub floors to be near Scott! I'd work in the fields! I'd beg on street corners!"

The gesture was theatrical, and the words, but the passion was authentic, not put on.

"You wouldn't last long at housework or field work, either, Francy. And pan-handling, to be profitable, has to be developed as a fine art."

Those hands pressed flat, one across the other! Small for so tall a girl, and very soft, with slender fingers and long darkly varnished nails. What good were hands like that, with

nails like that, except to scratch out somebody's eyes?

"You won't ever have to work, Francy, so why speak of t? I do have to work. I have to this winter, and teaching pays a little better than floor-scrubbing. I have to work and save enough to keep me while Lucas is in the Army. I'm going to marry him at the end of June and live somewhere near him while he's in training. I can't be sure of getting work next winter so I have to earn as much as I can between now and June. I have to look ahead. It would be pleasant not to have to but I can bear it now if I have something good in the future to look forward to."

"He may be in the Army before next June. Had you thought of that?" Francy asked. "We may be in the war before next June. If he enlists and gets killed before next June, what will you have to look forward to?"

Cruel. Cruel.

I wish I had never known you. I wish you weren't my own flesh and blood. I wish you hadn't my father's face and eyes; I loved him. But I hate you. I wish I hadn't met Lucas through you. Any other way except through you. I wish I didn't have to sleep under your roof tonight.

Francy passed her and went out to the living room door.

"Hi, Fran!" said Lucas.

Edwina, in the bedroom, shaken and sick, trembling with anger, heard Francy ask the question she always asked when Lucas came back from a visit home, "Did you hear anything about Scott?" and Lucas answered, as he always did, "No, but a lot of people asked about him. They expect me to have the latest news because I know you."

"You didn't see his parents?"

"I never do, Fran. They never come in to town."

The outer door closed.

3

"FRAN's looking better," he said.

He waited for an answer. There wasn't any.

"Don't you think she is, toad?"

"I didn't notice."

Her back was toward him. She had the icebox open and was taking things out and moving from icebox to table to sink.

"It's done her good having you with her this week."

No answer.

"She's by herself too much. She ought to see people and go out more and have people in. She used to have plenty of friends before she married. What's become of them all?"

"She dropped them. Scott didn't like them."

"Well, she thinks an awful lot of you."

No answer.

Probably her mind was on dinner-getting. He could talk about Francy later on. He pulled a kitchen chair out from the wall and straddled it, resting his arms on the back, watching her.

"New hair-do," he said.

"Yes."

She had it turned up in a roll that went all around her head with the top of her head smooth. It was very pretty hair, very crinkly; dark gold without any shine; very spirited hair that had to be pinned tight to make it behave, and when she took the pins out it didn't just hang limp; it stood out in a cloud.

"I like it loose," he said.

"That was all right for summer."

"It's very pretty, rolled up like that. It makes you more grown up."

"I hoped it would."

"A little severe, though."

"That was the idea."

She put a saucepan on the stove.

"New dress, toad?"

"Yes, it is."

She walked around him to the sink and back again to the stove, not looking at him. Her little mouth was drawn up on a puckering string. It did that when she was bothered.

"Darling, why do you fuss with dinner? We can eat out."

"It won't take a minute," she said.

She walked around him to the table and back to the icebox.

"Anything wrong, toad?"

She said, "Well, it would be a help if you'd move your chair so that I didn't have to walk around you every time I crossed the kitchen."

He pushed back the chair and went to lean in the doorway.

"Anything I can do?"

"No thanks."

"Did you tell Fran that Professor Martineau had a talk with you about her and Scott?"

"I mentioned it."

"How much did you tell her?"

"Only that he said marrying her was the best thing Scott could have done for himself. I didn't say he asked me if she were likely to stick to Scott, no matter what. She'd have wanted to know what he meant by no matter what and I have no idea what he meant. I didn't ask him."

"I suppose he thinks it's queer that she hasn't gone out to join her ailing husband. People around home think it's queer, too, and they keep asking me what's really the matter with him and when I say he had shingles in his head they roar."

"I don't know why they should! He might have lost his eyesight."

"Well, when I say he cracked up from overwork and from worrying about the war, they think that's funny, too, because he's such a big rugged-looking chap and of course it's a joke around home, his old man being a physical culture crank."

"I don't see anything funny about it," she said curtly.

"You needn't jump on me, darling! I didn't say I thought it was funny."

Certainly she was upset about something and he didn't for a minute believe it was Scott Collier.

"I wish you'd tell me what's eating you, toad."

"Lucas, please!" she said.

"Please what?"

She didn't answer. He held onto his temper. This was one time he couldn't afford a row with her.

"Toad. Do you love me?"

She gave him a quick glance, not particularly tender. He wasn't asking for information. He wasn't asking for confirmation of what he already knew. It was only a game they had.

"Well, do you?"

"Yes," she said briefly.

"How much?"

"Too much."

That was the wrong answer, and a rather nasty way of saying it, too. It was only a game, a ritual of question-and-answer, a preamble to love-making, a device of his for bringing her attention back to him when it wandered. Usually it worked. Usually it made her smile, no matter how preoccupied or worried she was.

"Whose are you?"

"Lucas," she said, "will you please go into the living room and amuse yourself until I have finished getting dinner?"

"No, I won't," he answered sharply, "and don't use that schoolmarm tone on me. I don't like being spoken to as if I were a halfwit child at the bottom of the class."

He crossed the kitchen in two strides and put his arms around her.

"Be nice, darling."

"I didn't mean to be nasty," she said, leaning against him for a moment, "but I can't get anything done while you're talking to me. You know I have a one-track mind."

"I know you have, and I like it when it one-tracks to me as it should."

"It can't now. I have to broil the chops."

"I'll broil them."

"No!" she said. "Heavens no! I've seen you in a kitchen. I don't want to spend hours cleaning up after you! Please go into the living room."

"Come in with me. Put the chops back in the icebox for a while. I want to talk to you."

She pulled away from him.

"I'm hungry, if you aren't! I can't go for hours and hours without food the way you can. Please don't be exasperating, Lucas. I swear I won't take more than five minutes."

"Okay," he said. "Kiss me before I go?"

She lifted her face willingly and accepted his kiss but she didn't give any back to him.

He wandered disconsolately into the living room. He hated the place. He had spent hours alone in it already this evening. She needn't have stayed so long in the bedroom with Francy. Francy didn't need help when she dressed. She wasn't a child.

Could they have had a row of some sort in the bedroom? Francy had been unspeakable all summer. But it was only because she was lonely and miserable with Scott away. Nobody could be pleasanter company than Fran when Scott was around. It was bad for her to be alone so much. It was bad for anybody to be alone too much.

He threw himself down on the sofa. What a room. Edwina liked it. Why did she? All those greens. Rug, chair-seats, window-hangings, everything green. What floor showed beyond the rug was black and shiny. The wallpaper had enormous flowers on it, great clusters of faded blue and bluish pink hydrangeas growing out of white urns against a landscape background.

"Say, toad, honestly, don't you think this is the damnedest wallpaper?"

From the kitchen came a sizzling and sputtering. It wasn't she.

"Toad!"

No answer but the sputtering.

"Edweeeeeena!"

He went to the kitchen door.

"Hell's fire! Why can't you answer me?"

She was on her knees in front of the low oven, a holder in one hand, tugging at the broiling-pan which held the chops on a rack. She jerked. The pan came partway out. The fat in it spattered and roared, and she wailed, "Lucas, help me!"

He pushed her out of the way.

"What do you want done?"

"Turn them."

She handed him a fork.

"I couldn't hear what you were saying from the other room, Lucas, the broiler roared so. I'm terrified of getting hot fat on me, and the pan fits too well; it always sticks."

A chop bounded from the fork to the floor.

"That's mine," said Lucas. "I like them active."

"I scrubbed the floor thoroughly," she said, distressed, and he laughed at her.

"If I were finicky, darling, I'd have starved to death at the farm that year."

The table, once they were seated, seemed very wide. It wasn't really; a medium oval; but she seemed a long way off. It was strange to be at that table without Scott and Francy.

"Does Fran still have that Swede to cook for her?"

"Oh no. She let her go when Scott left. Once in a while she has something sent up from the corner tearoom but mostly she lives on black coffee."

"Golly, wouldn't her father-in-law have a fit. You ought to read his pamphlet on what coffee does to your pancreas, or maybe it's to your ductless glands, I forget. Anyhow, it would scare hell out of you."

Between the candles her face was warm white and peach-colored. When she smiled, a little dent showed in one of her cheeks; only one cheek; it was as if, no matter how gay and

provocative half of her seemed, the other half stayed watchful and grave.

"What you do to my ductless glands," he said, "is more destructive, of course."

He couldn't swallow, even to please her after all the trouble she'd taken. He marveled that she could. It must be difficult for her, judging by the time she was taking.

"How you dawdle."

"I can't bolt my food the way you do. Have you finished already? I must eat something or I'll wake up tomorrow with a raging headache."

She plodded on. He watched, impatient and restless.

"It's queer with Scott and Francy not here in their own dining room, isn't it?"

"I thought it would be nice to be by ourselves," she said, "for once. We almost never have been."

"It is nice. It's wonderful."

He carried the pitcher over to fill her glass and bent to kiss her ear.

"It's like being married," he said. "Almost."

"That's what I thought."

"Did you, toad?"

She put her fork down. Her mouth was puckering again.

"And did you think being married would be wonderful?"

"Lucas, don't!"

Was she going to cry?

He blew out the candles. He picked her up and carried her into the living room. She was heavier than she looked, a warm weight in his arms. She fitted his arms as no girl ever had or ever would. No other girl.

"How about getting married tonight, toad?"

She lay perfectly still against him.

"We couldn't."

"Yes, we could. I have a license. It's what we both want more than anything and we've waited plenty long. Too long."

She drew a deep sobbing breath. He put his mouth on hers and kept it there. She didn't struggle. Passivity was better than protest. Not very satisfying, though.

"Well, toad?"

"How could I marry you and go right away and leave you? It's hard enough, going, but being married would make it all the harder."

He didn't say, That's exactly what I'm counting on.

He said, "You don't have to go, sweetheart. Give up the damned job. Wire them you've changed your mind. That you're married. You said they wouldn't hire a married woman."

"Oh," she said despairingly, "I didn't think you'd start this all over again at the last minute."

"Did you think I'd let you go without a protest? I won't. I need you. I can't get through this year without you. You want to stay with me, don't you? You want to be married to me, don't you? You love me, don't you, darling? You'll like being married. It will be wonderful. I promise you it will."

In a voice so cold and hard that it appalled him, she asked, "Do you expect me to move into the men's dormitory with you? It wouldn't be allowed."

He wanted to shake her.

"There's no earthly reason why you shouldn't stay on here with Fran. She'd love having you. She'd jump at the chance."

"Oh, no, she wouldn't!"

"I tell you she would. I know she's been bad-tempered since Scott left but it's only because she's lonely and worried

about him and just lies around the apartment. She ought to brace up and go out once in a while and you could make her do it. I should think you'd feel it an obligation to look after her while Scott's away. You're the only relative she's got in this half of the country."

"So I'm to marry you and spend the winter with Francy," she said. "And what sort of marriage would that be?"

His self-control was slipping.

"A hell of a lot better than none!"

"I don't think so," she said.

How could she speak to him like that if she loved him at all? But of course she did love him.

"We'd rather be together all the time, of course," he tried to keep his voice down. She didn't like being yelled at. "But we can't yet, unless I give up school and take a job in some war industry."

"You can't do that! If you don't get your degree now, you never will."

"You want me to stay in school. Then marry me and stay with me."

"With Francy, you mean. You'd be willing to have your wife sponge on a cousin?"

"Sponge!" he was outraged. What a filthy word. "You'd be doing her a favor."

"She's the last person I'd ask to do me a favor. I'd rather starve than ask her to take me in this winter."

She meant it. He was shocked and incredulous.

"You'd rather let me starve, you mean. There's more than one kind of hunger and thirst."

"A man is supposed to be stronger and braver than a woman, isn't he?" she asked bitterly. "If I can wait for what I want, you should be able to."

She slipped from his knee and walked away from him and he was thankful to have her go. He no longer wanted to touch her. Didn't she know what she did to him when she stiffened herself in his arms like that? Or didn't she care if she repelled him? Look at her now. Ramrod stiff. Rigor what-do-you-call-it? Not mortis. Yes, it was, of a sort. The death of every particle of warmth and tenderness. Or hadn't she ever had any warmth for him?

If he lost his temper, everything was lost. If he left her in a rage, she would take her train in the morning. She must not take that train. A man was supposed to be stronger than a woman, was he? Then he would be.

She did love him. He must believe that if he was to go on believing in anything, including himself.

He had made the wrong approach. She must have had some sort of row with Francy. She ought to have told him. She kept too much to herself. Once they were married, he would teach her to let go in anger as well as in love. It wasn't healthy to bottle up anger and let it boil and bubble under cover.

"Apparently I made a bad mistake in bringing Fran into this. But she's your own flesh and blood and you've always seemed to get on well with her. I know she's been an awful sourpuss this summer, and time and again, when I wanted you to myself, you insisted on our coming over to see her and I thought it was because you were worried about her being lonely and unhappy; you're a lot more conscientious and charitable than I am. When people are low in their minds, and consequently nasty to me, I prefer to stay away from them until they can act decent again. If Fran's been nasty to you this week, I'm the last person to suggest that you

put your head in her mouth and let her bite it off. The hell with her."

He had talked out some of his irritation. He was hopeful again. Better than that. He was confident. He went up behind her and put his arms around her tightly. She seemed taller than usual.

"What makes you so tall, Wee Willie?"

"New shoes with heels," her voice was shaken.

All summer she had padded about in moccasins.

"To make me a few inches more impressive in the classroom," she said so piteously that he laughed out loud.

"You, impressive! I like you little. I wouldn't marry an impressive woman for anything. I want a wife I can pick up and carry around under one arm."

"Or drag by the hair."

"I wouldn't think of dragging you by the hair! Elise is a different proposition. She's big enough to take care of herself. Besides, she bit me."

He turned her around to face him, still keeping her in the circle of his arms.

"I'll say nothing more about your living with Fran. She's your cousin, not mine, and if you don't like her, the hell with her. I've got some cousins I can't stand and a couple of uncles I wouldn't wish on a dog. But you're really fond of Pop and Lydia, aren't you? And you know they adore you."

"I love them," she said, and he knew she meant it.

"And you don't find Hendry too objectionable?"

"I love him dearly."

"They're going to rattle around in that big house this winter with all the rest of us gone. Can you imagine poor Lyddy at home alone all day with Pop at the office and Hendry in school?"

"No, I can't, because she won't stay at home alone. She'll join some more group activities."

"She already belongs to all the town offers, and some of them bore her to tears."

"She's never bored if she's with people, and it doesn't much matter which people because she likes all kinds."

"Yes, but some she likes better than others. She likes you. She's crazy about you. She'd stay home and like it if you were there all the time. And think how thrilled Hendry would be to have you under the same roof with him, day and night, for a whole year. There's no telling what the effect on him might be. He might even take to washing above the wrists. He gave up swearing for you."

"Oh," she cried, "you aren't fair!"

She put her hands flat against him to push him farther away but he wouldn't be pushed.

"You're cruel, trying to break me down through my love for your family. But I'm not going to sponge on them any more than I would on Francy."

That word again. His head began to pound. He was getting red in the face. He knew it by the way his temples throbbed.

"You always pay your own way, no matter where you are! You do ten times more than you need to and more than anyone wants you to! I don't know why you have to be so damned sensitive, as if people didn't like having you around."

She said stubbornly, "I'm not going to live on your father. He has five children of his own to support without adding a daughter-in-law to the burden."

"But you wouldn't cost him anything! You'd be living at home! You don't eat more than a sparrow!"

Her eyes were steady and very blue. Icy blue.

"It isn't just a case of board and room. You know it isn't, Lucas. Things happen. Your father would feel responsible for me and he oughtn't to. It isn't fair to expect him to. Suppose I had an expensive illness. I might, you know."

He laughed a little too loudly because that was about as far-fetched as anything he could imagine.

"I'll take a chance on you, Wee Willie. You're pretty healthy."

It was the wrong thing to say. It was the wrong time to have laughed. He didn't know why, but she was looking at him as if she hated him. Sweat broke out on his forehead.

"Yes, I'm very healthy," she said, "healthy enough to earn my own keep and pay my own bills until you can do it for me. You, not your father."

He stepped back from her. When she looked and spoke like that, he didn't want to touch her. But he had to have everything clear between them. He said, "Very well. Take the job. But it doesn't start until Monday. I'll borrow a car and drive you up on Sunday. Fran will lend me hers. She never uses it. Will you give me until Monday, Edwina? We'll be married tonight. We'll have three days now and another honeymoon at Christmas. You get two weeks at Christmas."

"Ten days," she said. It was the schoolmarm tone, correcting the halfwit child for the thousandth time. "And I have to be in Midas on Saturday morning for the teachers' meeting. I told you that. It's as much a part of the job as teaching is."

If she had said it with distress or regret or the faintest sign of love or suffering, he could have forgiven her.

She didn't care two pins for him. All she cared about was doing what she had made up her one-track mind to do, having her own way, regardless of him.

Who was she? Not his little toad. Not his Wee Willie whom he loved and wanted and couldn't live without.

A strange, stubborn, unloving woman.

"Lucas! You're not leaving me?"

He had the hall door open. He didn't know how he had reached it. The big glass knob was slippery in his hand. He was drenched with sweat, shivering, exhausted, as if he had run a race and burst his heart for nothing. He had lost.

"Aren't you even going to kiss me good night?"

She had come up behind him. She stood close to him. Why did she want to be kissed when she didn't love him? He touched her cheek with his lips and stepped quickly out into the corridor. All he wanted was to get away from her and forget about her as quickly as he could. There was only one way. Earlier, when he had first arrived, she had thought he was tight. Well, he soon would be. She had been looking into the future. She was expert at that, better than he had suspected.

He raised his hand in what he hoped was a debonair gesture. He managed a smile. He could just manage it. He said, "You have second sight, haven't you?"

Let her figure that out.

He tried not to hurry, walking away from her. He knew she was looking after him. When he reached the stairs he went down in great leaps.

4

SHE wrote, "With love, Edwina," and folded the letter and wrote his name on the envelope and sealed it. With love, Edwina. What understatement. What restraint. But she couldn't spill out all she felt until she had heard from him. This was her third letter. There had been no answer.

She x'd out another day on her little desk calendar. That made a week that she had been away from him. A row of x's. In a letter a row of x's stood for kisses. Sign language for children and lovers. Lovers were pretty childish at times.

Perhaps tomorrow there would be a letter from him. His silence didn't mean anything bad, of course. He put off letter-writing as long as possible, that was all. At that, he wasn't as bad as Lydia who never wrote anything if she could wiggle out of it, not even thank you's or regrets or letters to her own children. She traipsed all over town paying household bills in cash to get out of writing checks and because she loved visiting with her tradesman friends.

His not coming to the station hadn't meant anything bad. He hated seeing people off, especially anyone he was fond of. She had thought he might come, though. She had hoped up to the last minute, pressing her face to the train-window, her

head aching from a restless night, her heart hurting for a different reason, one tremendous ache, all of her. He hadn't come. He had been sleeping, probably. She hadn't slept much.

She had started her day's journey with a frightful hangover. Angry first with Francy and then with him. He had been angry, too, but he got over anger quickly. He didn't seem to know what a hangover was, emotional or any other kind. He said he had never had a headache and she believed it.

He felt better after a good row. How like us, she thought. He gets the relief and I get the headache.

She sat looking at the little calendar. If she had done what he wanted, she would have spent this whole first month watching the calendar in terror. Or she might have known before the month was up. Some girls started being sick mornings right from the first week. The new job was difficult enough without that. She would have held it against him forever, a little. She wanted a child. Oh, she wanted a child but not now. Not yet. Away from Lucas, a new hard job on her hands, no money, no home, and Lucas with a year of college to get through and then a year in the Army.

She would have had to keep the marriage a secret or give up her job. She would have had to go to Mr. Wace, the principal, just before Christmas, and tell him that she was married and couldn't finish the year because she was going to have a child. Humiliating. Dreadful. She would have felt like a cheat. Cheated, too.

She put the calendar into its pigeonhole.

Well, nothing had happened. Nothing but a row with Lucas and a painful parting. A dreadful parting. He had been furious with her and she with him. But at the last he had been

more hurt than angry. Hurt. Yes, she knew it because he had turned so white after being so boiling bursting red with rage. She had never seen him so white and exhausted-looking. Well, she had been exhausted, too.

She should have told him plainly why she wouldn't marry him. But why hadn't he thought of it without being told? She had said something, "Suppose I had an expensive illness," hoping it might make him think, and he had answered cheerfully, "I'll take a chance on you. You're pretty healthy." That was when she had hated him. For his obtuseness, or worse. Because what if he had thought of it and counted on its happening to make her give up her job?

She had been afraid, after that, to say, "What if I started a baby?" because he might have answered, with that outrageous cheerfulness, "Fine. I hope you do. Then you'll have to come home at Christmas for keeps."

If he had said that, and he was perfectly capable of saying a thing like that, she could almost hear him saying it, she couldn't have married him ever. She could accept obtuseness and go on loving him. Callousness she couldn't accept. She couldn't live with it all her life.

But he wasn't callous. He wasn't. He just hadn't thought. He had no looking-ahead sense. It was an irritating blind spot in him but not too important. You didn't cut off your right arm because there was a blister on your hand. A blister could give you blood poisoning and kill you. But usually it just healed over and left no scar. A small irritation. Not fatal.

There were plenty of small things about her character that irritated him. He thought she was over-conscientious, overcautious, too self-contained. He might be right about her. Well, marriage, not a few days and nights of it but a few years of it, would help to make her more like him and he

might grow to be a little bit like her. A good marriage was supposed to do that to people. After fifty years or so they even grew to look alike.

She smiled a little. She didn't want him to grow to look like her. She wanted him to look just like himself, always, and she hoped the child they had would be exactly like him.

She loved him so much. She did love him so much.

She needed a letter from him, with love in it, to blot out some of the dreadfulness of that parting.

She picked up the letter she had just sealed and went down the stairs and out to the narrow front porch where Miss Lark sat fanning herself.

"Isn't it hot!" said Miss Lark. "I came out for a breath of air but there isn't one."

If there had been a breath of air, it couldn't have reached her. Overgrown bushes of bridal wreath blocked off breeze and view, the porch was suffocating, and Miss Lark's long fleshy face was flushed dark pink with heat. A pudding face. Steamed raspberry pudding, Edwina thought. Moist and doughy and sweet. Opal used to make it.

"Papa always felt this early September heat even more than August dog days," said Miss Lark. "It's most debilitating."

Her large head, loaded with puffs and braids and silver combs and big gray bone pins, shook gently to and fro in condemnation of September heat. Edwina had at first mistaken the head-motion for a nervous tremor, but it wasn't that; it came only with conversation. The to-and-fro was for disapproval, distress, or incredulity, the up-and-down for sympathy, eager agreement, or general emphasis. If she had had a neck, it would have been worn to a thread, but where her head fitted into her solid shoulders there was a ball-bearing device. There must be.

She was shaped like a humming top, no taller than Edwina but her upper part was wider, with fat arms and a tremendous bosom and substantial iron-bound waist; from there, sharply, she sloped down modest hips and still more modest gray-lisle calves to trim little ankles and feet as small as Edwina's own. A humming top but mercifully she neither spun nor hummed. When no social demands were made upon her, she could keep her head as quiet as anybody's; in fact she could keep more completely quiet than anyone Edwina had ever lived with; she could read her evening paper all through without one rustle, or sit in silence while Edwina read it.

"Won't you sit, my dear? It will be cooler soon."

"I'll just mail this letter first," Edwina said.

Miss Lark nodded understanding and approbation.

"The nearest box is at the corner of School and Orchard Street, the one you pass on your way to school every day."

"I know," Edwina said. "I'll be back in a jiffy."

The lawns along School Street were parched. It had been a dry summer, Miss Lark said, and a dry fall was promised. The leaves would turn early. There was a touch of red even now at the tops of the School Street maples, big solid middle-aged trees about the same age, Edwina figured, as the other members of the highschool faculty. Mr. Wace called her the faculty baby. He meant it kindly, but she didn't like it. She had hoped there would be at least one teacher near her own age. Miss Beatley, the head of the English department, must be all of forty. There was nobody young. Not that it mattered, really.

I shan't be here long, she thought. Ten months. I can do without friends. It takes me that long to get friendly with people anyway.

Places become familiar to her more quickly than people.

This walk along School Street, which she took four times a day, from Miss Lark's to school, back again to luncheon, to school again, and back in the afternoon, had lost its strangeness in a single week. She had landmarks she watched for. A row of tall zinnias beside a fence; a yard choked with blazing marigolds; a house adorned with wooden gingerbread; a brown mansard with morning glories climbing up it. There was only one new house on the street and it was small and painted white and had a rust-colored door and shutters. She would have liked to move into it with Lucas. But any house, a single room, would do, with Lucas.

By June this street, these yards and houses, every crack in the sidewalk, every notched maple leaf, would be as familiar to her as the lines in her palm or the part in her hair, and he might never have set foot in the town. Ten months, a whole segment of her life, and he wouldn't have shared it. Not a person in the whole of Midas, except herself, knew that he existed.

Homesickness for him, the worst yet, attacked her. The first hectic absorbing week was past; it was Friday evening; she could draw breath; she could be herself again instead of Miss Voorhis, the new teacher, the assistant to Miss Beatley; she could put off that new identity, the public role, and be her private self for a while. It was Friday evening and homesickness for Lucas was a fox in her breast, gnawing; they had always had Friday evenings together; movies, a dance at the gym, a party at somebody's house, a ride into the country in somebody's car; talk with Francy and Scott; or just a walk along dark streets with arms linked. No real privacy, but togetherness. Where was he now, doing what?

The letterbox received her letter with a metallic clank.

Why hadn't he written to her? He must know she needed a letter from him!

She walked fast, back along School Street. She mustn't burst into tears on the street. But why didn't he write? Where was he?

The university hadn't yet opened. He might not have gone home again. He might be visiting friends. She had sent her letters to his home. Would anyone have forwarded them? Not Lydia. But Hendry might. He was dependable. He loved her. A letter from her, even if not for him, would have value for him. He would send it on to Lucas.

She must write Hendry a letter for himself. He might answer quickly. He might just happen to say where Lucas was. If she didn't hear from Lucas tomorrow or Monday, she would write to Hendry. But of course she would hear by Monday. She would write to Hendry anyway, for his own sake. She would ask how school was, and how his friend Perkins was after the mumps, and how Canfield, his cat, was. She would tell him about her school; about the pink brick house where she boarded, which wasn't an ordinary boarding house because Miss Lark "took a teacher" mainly to have company; about the stone deaf and ancient maid, Winifred, a gray wraith in felt slippers and a wrap-around apron, who couldn't hear the wildest scream but could read a whisper on the lips of Miss Lark; who refused to try to read anyone else's lips, and seldom talked herself but communicated with Miss Lark by grimaces.

In the margin she would draw for Hendry an outline of Miss Lark, shaped like a humming top, wearing her church hat with the wheat and her too-tight white kid gloves.

"Oh, you hurried," said Miss Lark, shaking her head. "Do sit down and rest. Have this fan. I'm quite cool. Do have it."

Edwina sat on the top step and fanned herself.

"Is your room very uncomfortable, my dear? It's the coolest of the upstairs rooms. It used to be the guest room but after we lost Mamma we stopped having guests and I persuaded Papa to move in there because it didn't get full sun until afternoon and being at the back it was fairly quiet. He did mind heat, and as he grew older, he minded noise more; his hearing seemed to grow more acute; if I raised my voice even a trifle, he had a spasm of nerves, and he stopped seeing callers because he said they all screamed at him. I even had to stop having the daily paper delivered because the boy simply would not bring it to the porch and lay it down quietly, he'd twist it and throw it against the door, and Papa would hear that thud and it would go all through him."

Years of Papa, who heard too well, and Winifred, who heard nothing, had reduced Miss Lark's voice to a fine thread along which the perfectly articulated words slipped soothingly. Very, very soothingly. How tired I am, Edwina thought. But the first, the worst week is over; I'm still alive and in one piece; they didn't eat me and toss away the bones; they didn't suspect how frightened I was; they must never suspect; I can handle them because I must; I can do it; I can do it by putting aside my private self and becoming somebody different, more than myself, in the classroom, a Teacher, a symbol; I can think myself tall; as a Teacher, I embody the law.

"At ninety-six, he could have heard a pin drop anywhere in the house," said Miss Lark.

Had a pin ever been permitted to drop in that house? It had the immaculate order and hush of a well-endowed museum; an Early American wing; the same sort of furniture and almost as much of it.

"I hope you don't feel sensitive about that room because it was Papa's. He didn't die in it, my dear. He had his last attack in the hall downstairs. There used to be a blue and white crockery umbrella stand in the corner by the door and he struck his head on it when he fell, and he was probably dead before he struck it, the doctor said, but I couldn't bear to have it stand there any longer, in case it had hastened his death, and yet Mamma had always kept it there, and it had been one of her wedding presents and was useful for wet umbrellas, and for weeks I was in the most terrible state of indecision about it, till Winifred finally moved it out to the kitchen and now she takes the umbrellas out there."

The street was darkening. It was very quiet. From somewhere came a smell of wet earth and grass. A neighbor had been watering his thirsty lawn. The world was narrowing down and closing in until it was no wider than the circle of a pasteboard fan that said in small black letters next the wooden handle, "Cooley's Drug Store."

Edwina roused herself with an effort.

"Oh, I like the room very much, Miss Lark."

It was the largest room she had ever had and much the pleasantest, with two huge windows, a view of trees, massive furniture, and a flowered carpet that stretched from wall to wall. The bathroom, around the corner and two steps down, with a museum-piece tub encased in dark brown wood, was as large as her bedroom at the Martineaus'.

"If there's anything that isn't exactly right," said Miss Lark, "just tell me and I'll tell Winifred. She's stubborn about not trying to read a stranger's lips. She was just the same about not using the hearing-aid that Papa brought home for her to try. She isn't moody like most deaf people, though; she's quite even-tempered and wonderfully reliable; and I don't know

what I should have done without her after we lost Mamma, because Papa had to have everything just so, and Mamma had never let me do anything about the house except take care of the plants; I had never organized a spring cleaning, or demothed the woolens, or even ordered a meal; I was simply distracted, but Winifred knew Mamma's ways and she took care of everything without supervision from me. I do think she cooks well, don't you? Papa said that when he was abroad he kept wishing for Winifred's baked beans and codfish balls; he couldn't get anything fit to eat; everything was in sauces, and veal all the time, and he never trusted veal."

Miss Lark's head shook, disapproving of veal, and the tiny diamonds screwed to her long thick earlobes winked faintly in the fading light. Pinned to her front was a brooch surrounded by tiny diamonds.

"What a beautiful cameo, Miss Lark."

"Isn't it!" the to-and-fro changed to complacent nodding. "It's a very good one. Mamma always wore it. Papa brought it to her from abroad the same time he brought the Pliny's Doves that stand on the little hall table by the telephone."

She unfastened the brooch and held it out. On the oval stone two delicate white figures stood embracing in a swirl of drapery. A quaint ornament for the piqué collar of an elderly spinster. But of course Mamma's wearing had sanctified it. Miss Lark re-pinned it.

"I still miss Mamma. I was forty-one when we lost her and I was just as dependent on her as a little girl."

Dependent. Dependent at forty-one? thought Edwina, amazed. I wasn't dependent on my mother when we lost her. Thirteen but I wasn't a little girl. Not exactly. Dependent on Father, though, and she on both of us. We took more care of her than she was ever able to take of us. I guess you

can miss someone you love and have taken care of just as much as someone you love who's taken care of you.

And I'd made such lovely plans for the baby. I was going to take all the care of him myself. He was going to be my baby, too. I wanted him just as much as Mother did and I'd wanted him just as long, ever since I could walk and talk and play with dolls.

"I had Papa with me ten years after that," said Miss Lark. "He's been gone nearly seven years. He would have been a hundred and three if he had lived until last July."

A hundred and three. More than twice what Father would have been if he had lived until now.

"I can't realize that he's gone," said Miss Lark. "Do you know, sometimes when I'm down town shopping, or paying calls, or talking on the telephone with Mrs. Theriault, that's our minister's wife, she wasn't at church on Sunday, she had a cold, but you'll meet her soon, I find myself tucking away bits of news that I think will interest Papa, reminding myself to tell him later. Isn't it strange? He seems still alive."

Not in my bedroom, I hope.

"It doesn't seem so long as seven years," said Miss Lark. "It doesn't seem any time at all."

It seems a lifetime. Five years is a lifetime. Five years ago I was a senior in highschool and I never dreamed he had anything the matter with him and all I worried about was finishing the year with honors to make him proud of me. I was going to wait a year before college, and keep house for him. We were going to let Opal go and just be together.

How old I am. Why, I'm older than Miss Lark. Years older. As much has happened to me as to her, and more. Oh, more. I wonder if she ever loved anyone except her Papa and her Mamma. I wonder.

"I must have the bridal wreath pruned," said Miss Lark. "Papa wouldn't like to see it so ungainly. I know I'm foolish but I do hate to have anything pruned. I can't bear to cut off anything that's alive. I'm so fond of plants. I almost expect them to bleed when great pieces of them are cut off."

Bleeding to death. Francy had said that. Cut off from the sight and the sound and the touch of love.

It was easier to feel tolerant of Francy, at a distance. Sympathetic, even.

Well. Now I know how she feels, thought Edwina. I hope missing Lucas won't make me as hateful to everybody as missing Scott has made her. I don't want to be known around school as a stinker, like Miss Oakes. Francy would be better off in her mind if she had a job and was obliged to behave well to keep it; something to think about besides herself and Scott.

But what had she ever thought about or talked about except herself and some man? Why, even at thirteen, the one time they had met as children, she had talked about nothing but some highschool boy she was in love with. The next time they met, when Francy had turned up at college to get away from a troublesome love affair, so she said, and she had taken Edwina to lunch at the Crown, she had talked about nothing but the men she had been in love with and the kind of man she wanted to be in love with. That was all she ever did talk about, all the times after that until she married Scott, and from then on all she could talk about was herself and Scott.

"We have always had bridal wreath in front of the porch," said Miss Lark. "Whenever it winter-killed, Papa had more put in. When I was a tiny girl I used to play under it. I had a pretend-house between the bushes and the porch."

It wasn't easy to see her as a little girl. A pudding-faced

good little girl in ruffled drawers and long black stockings, with two thick pigtails? Neat and pudgy and good.

But if she had been a little girl once, she must have been a young girl later on. Pompadour and high-necked shirtwaist and tight high corset and skirt to her neat ankles? And a pretend-lover instead of a pretend-house? Or perhaps a real lover. But she hadn't married him. Perhaps he hadn't suited Papa and Mamma.

Had she ever sat on this porch in the warm darkness, wanting somebody till she ached?

The sky was dark and stars were pricking through. The air was cooler, and listening to Miss Lark was as sleep-inducing as counting a thousand sheep.

"I think I'll go to bed early," said Edwina. "I'm pretty tired. The first week of school is something of a strain."

She would go to bed and to sleep, for peaceful hours she would be unaware of time and place and self, and when she woke in the morning, there might be a letter for her on the telephone table beside the Pliny's Doves.

5

THERE was no letter on Saturday. There was none on Monday. She wrote to Hendry.

The second week of school was less terrifying than the first had been. Strangeness was part of what she had dreaded and even on the first day strangeness had been the least of it. Every September for the last sixteen years had found her in a school room of one sort or another, and one was much like another, with the smell of new varnish, the chalkdust and ink on the fingers, the books, the bells ringing to end periods of enforced quiet, the bedlam of voices breaking loose and feet trampling and then quiet again. The only real strangeness this September was in her metamorphosis from student to teacher.

Schools were more alike than houses were or people or towns. The atmosphere of a school, once the daily routine was established, felt much like the atmosphere of any other school. But that wasn't true of houses, at least not the ones she had known, and she had known several intimately, six if she counted Miss Lark's which she would know better by next June. She congratulated herself on being able to board in so quiet, orderly, and comfortable a house as Miss Lark's;

nobody would choose to live in a museum, perhaps, but a museum supervised by a Winifred had its points. Comfort and order combined with quiet were not to be sneezed at. While her mother lived, there had been quiet and comfort but constant disorder; how could an invalid keep up with the housework? After her mother's death they had moved to a yellow frame house of which they had occupied the upper half, and they had had order, created three times a week by Opal, with sound and fury. At the Wilkinses', after her father's death, no quiet, no comfort; perhaps there had been comfort, but not for her. And at the Martineaus', when Mrs. Martineau's cello wasn't making its moan, the Professor's typewriter was clacking away and students were always dropping in for conferences and faculty wives dropping in for tea. But of course no such confusion and hubbub as at the Pancoasts'.

The Pancoasts really liked noise. Sometimes Mr. Pancoast was fed up and then he withdrew to the basement where he kept a rocking chair and a library of detective stories. He paid Hendry to keep the basement swept; it was moderately clean and occasionally quiet. But the rest of the house sounded like a boiler factory, especially at meals, and it was a mess most of the time because Lydia's maids never stayed long, there was too much work, too many in the family, too many guests, and in between maids came accommodaters and usually they took advantage of Lydia. Sometimes the food was good and sometimes dreadful but nobody in the family seemed to care because quantity mattered more to them than quality.

They would have starved to death at Miss Lark's. The portions, appropriately, were bird-sized. They suited Edwina. They had suited Papa. He had been in his grave for seven years but from the grave he still ruled his daughter's mind

and Winifred's menus. Chicken was stewed and served on biscuit; Papa thought the gravy was the best part. Roast lamb was accompanied by currant jelly; Papa said mint sauce was sloppy. Turnip was left out of a boiled dinner; it gave Papa gas.

After ten days of meals with Miss Lark, Edwina felt that she knew Papa more intimately than she would ever know his daughter.

It was wonderfully agreeable to sit in a quiet dining room at a beautifully polished dark oval table, across from Miss Lark, to be served silently and fastidiously by Winifred, and to be able to leave the table afterward without having to think about the dishes. She could never explain that to Lucas. She could never explain to him why the first visits to his home had shattered her so much that she had been thankful to go back to college and the Martineaus' housework to recuperate. The confusion, the exhilaration, the howls of laughter at jokes she couldn't understand because they were mostly pointless family jokes; the demonstrative affection she loved but wasn't used to; the radio that went steadily from breakfast to bedtime except when somebody started the victrola instead; the meals with an amount of food that staggered her, great mounds of it, meals never on time, sometimes ahead of time, the food undercooked, if the boys came in ravenous, sometimes two hours late, the food scorched or dried to shavings. And always a lot of people around, not only the family, but their friends; and never less than three talking at once and oftener ten; and Lydia, who could listen to half a dozen conversations at once and make sufficient sense of them to join in, talking more than anybody in her excited, exciting, strident voice, with her peacock scream of laughter piercing the eardrums of everyone near her.

It wasn't safe to think too much about the Pancoasts' house, because suddenly the orderly quiet of Miss Lark's was suffocating.

On Thursday, the second Thursday, Miss Lark met Edwina at the door when she came home from school.

"Letter for you, Miss Voorhis. I was so pleased when the postman brought it that I nearly walked up School to meet you. I know you've been anxious, my dear, not hearing from home."

Oh, sweet Miss Lark, most radiant of women!

The letter was from Hendry.

"Isn't it the one you wanted?" asked Miss Lark in distress.

If not exactly the most radiant of women, she was certainly one of the kindest.

"No, but it's from home and I'm very thankful to have it," Edwina said.

She put down her books and papers. She carried the letter into Miss Lark's parlor and sat in the green velvet chair beside the tray of miniature cacti. She read hastily, mentally inserting the punctuation which Hendry stubbornly, on principle, declined to use. He knew all about punctuation and he said it was silly.

There was no mention of Lucas.

She read it through again, slowly.

"Dear Edwina I was glad to hear from you I was dissappointed you didnt come home that week school is very boring miss burns is an old stinker perkins face has gone down Mother says you must come for thanksgiving because christmas is too long to wait I am working on your christmas present now Mother thinks she will have her hair cut off to beat the hairpin shortage if there is one she says if silk stockings give out she will paint her legs that God willing she will

never wear cotton the car isnt fixed yet Pop says by the time we can afford to have it fixed the tires will have rotted and there wont be rubber for new ones after all the years I have waited to get a drivers license if there is no car to drive it will be awful Fitz has a new girl not a bad looker she goes to smith I hope Batty gets a new girl at college it will make justine mad as hell hes had her forever a change would do him good."

The hell was smeared and hops written over it. He had given up swearing because it made her wince but when it came to mention of Batty's girl he forgot himself. His dislike of Justine was implacable.

"Canfield threw up on the kitchen floor last night Pop says fur balls but Mother says his system is breaking down he is the same age as I am but that makes him a pretty old man for a cat he sends love we all send love Hendry."

Capital letters he conferred upon his family, his God, his cat, and himself. Only one misspelled word, and that wasn't ignorance, it was obstinacy, like the omitted periods and capitals. He maintained that dissappointed looked more like what it was than when it was spelled with a single s. He had argued it out with her. Seeing it now, in his letter, she was inclined to admit that the extra s increased the emotional content. There was something in his contention.

I'm glad I'm not his English teacher, she thought.

The sight of his handwriting on the envelope had been crushing, a dissappointment with two s's. She was remorseful. The letter wasn't from Lucas but it was a sign of love, proof that she wasn't really alone in the world but had a whole family who belonged to her and to whom she was important.

Of them all, next to Lucas himself, she loved Hendry the most. From the beginning she had been less shy of him than

of the others, perhaps because he was her own size and because he showed her, quite unselfconsciously, that he thought she was wonderful. Lucas loved her but he didn't think anybody was wonderful.

"This is from my little brother, Miss Lark. He isn't really my brother. I haven't any real relations that I know of except a cousin who was in college with me and an uncle, her father, whom I've never seen. But these people are just like my own. I spend all my holidays with them and I think of their house as home. It's the kind of family I always wanted to belong to, four brothers, and a girl a little older than I am. Mrs. Pancoast says she had five children so that she could count on plenty of people in the house to keep her company but when they all reached school age there she was at home alone for hours every day so she plunged into all sorts of club activities, anything at all that meant being with people. Garden clubs, although she never gardened in her life and vows she never will; she says why should she provide food for cutworms and rosebugs until the insect world takes over and she's obliged to? And sewing groups, although she can't sew and won't even mend. And four book clubs, though she never read a book through in her life and when it's her turn to review one she makes Hendry or her husband read it and tell her what it's all about. And courses on child guidance, though she wouldn't guide anybody for anything and asks advice from her own children. And lectures on current events and New Thought and interior decorating and Little Theatre and the care and feeding of infants."

I must stop this. Talking about Lydia is making me talk like her. I'm a babbling brook. I'll be discussing Lucas and my love life if I don't stop.

Hendry's letter had loosed her tongue and the strings of

her heart. Hendry loved her. He had answered her letter promptly although letter-writing wasn't any easier for him than it was for Lucas.

Where was Lucas? If he had been at home, Hendry would have mentioned him.

Hendry's letter was a comfort, but it wasn't what she needed. She didn't put it under her pillow that night or carry it to school in her pocket the next day.

Friday. She had been away two whole weeks. She rushed home after school but there was no letter from Lucas. She shut herself into her bedroom.

Two whole weeks without a word, and after such a parting. This wasn't carelessness; it was deliberate cruelty. He was punishing her. And what for? Because she had a little of the looking-ahead sense and the self-control which he completely lacked.

Cruel! What manner of love was it that could be cruel to its object? Careless unconscious cruelty was one thing; bad but understandable, pardonable. Deliberate vindictive cruelty was something else. She wouldn't have supposed him capable of it.

What do I know about him, really? she wondered in fright. If he's capable of this, he must be different, in other ways, from what I thought he was and what I loved. Have I let myself be in love all this time with somebody I just made up who looks like Lucas but isn't Lucas at all? Women do that. But how could I have made him up? He isn't the sort of lover I ever dreamed of wanting. He isn't the first man I've liked or the first who's liked me. Only the others were boys. Some of them would probably have made better husbands than he ever will, but I never thought of being married to them. I never fell in love with any of them.

Perhaps he's written to me and addressed it wrong so that the letter went astray. Maybe he sent it to Midas, Vermont, or Midas, Connecticut, or Midas, New York.

She could write to Hendry again and ask right out where Lucas was. But that would show that she hadn't heard from him. It would be complaining to the family, through its youngest member. How low she was sunk, even to think of such a thing.

She wouldn't think of it. She would stop thinking about Lucas and about any world beyond the limits of Midas. She wouldn't spend another Friday evening moping.

During dinner she talked with animation about the teaching of English to first and second year highschoolers and listened avidly to Miss Lark's account of the Sunday School class of girls just that age with whom Mamma had had her difficulties. But of course Mamma had known just how to handle them and make them love her. They had grown up to be lovely women, married and settled down. Miss Lark had been invited to a baby shower for one of them just last month.

"My girls," said Edwina, "will grow up to be gangsters' molls. Do you ever go to the movies, Miss Lark?"

"Oh, I love them," said Miss Lark, eagerly nodding, "but not the ones with shooting. Winifred goes on her Thursday evening, regularly, and if she thinks I'll like the picture I go on Friday. She doesn't get as much out of them as she used to when they were silent but she follows the pantomime and can tell me if there's any shooting or a sad ending. I stay away from the sad ones."

"What did Winifred say about tonight's?"

"Oh, it's nice and cheerful, with dancing. The news reel is pretty bad. It's bombings."

"We could shut our eyes to the news," said Edwina. "Lots

of people do. Will you go with me? I always feel like celebrating on a Friday evening."

Miss Lark turned pink with pleasure.

"If we start at once," she said, "we can get good seats for the first performance. I'll put on my hat."

She put on her best one with the wheat. It was a party.

Movies with Miss Lark instead of with Lucas.

Why not? thought Edwina angrily. I like her. She's good and innocent and kind. A lot of people aren't even kind. And she lets me live in her very comfortable house and charges me very little and treats me like an honored guest instead of a boarder just to have company. So I'd better try to be good company.

But in the dark of the theatre she was haunted by all the times she had sat in dark theatres beside Lucas with her hand tucked into his. No matter how interesting the picture, she had never forgotten his nearness although sometimes he became absorbed and forgot hers. She couldn't have forgotten him, anyway, because he groaned and muttered under his breath and swore or shouted with laughter. He liked best the theatre next the campus which was usually crammed with students who stamped on the floor and whooped and hissed and ate popcorn out loud and made loud smacking noises during love scenes.

Miss Lark sat mouse-still and Edwina forgot her.

What if he never does write to me? What shall I do?

But there's probably some reasonable explanation. He may have gone to visit friends without telling the family where, and he may be ill and the family doesn't know it or Hendry would have mentioned it. He might be so dangerously ill that Hendry wouldn't be told and Mr. Pancoast would keep it from me till the danger was past. Or till I'd have to be sent

for. How would I get to him in a hurry from here? Hire a car to take me to the Junction and catch the night express? I'd have to borrow from Miss Lark. My first pay check isn't due for two weeks. What galling helplessness to have no money for emergencies.

It would have been like that all the time if I'd done what he wanted first, married him and been satisfied to live on Francy or his family, always supposing the family or Francy would have been willing to take me in. No money for the pettiest personal trifles, let alone a real emergency. Having to borrow, or beg, from Mr. Pancoast or Francy. I wouldn't have done it, of course; I could have gotten theses to type; something to earn a pittance. But what if I'd started a baby? I might have been sick from the very first and unable to do any sort of work, even typing. People have no business starting a baby until they can pay for it themselves and give it some sort of security to be born into, security provided by themselves, not by their parents or other relatives or friends.

I should have told him what I was afraid of. Probably he would have said, "Don't worry, darling, we won't have one until you're good and ready."

I would have worried just the same. A lot of people plan when to have their children and when not to, and it's all right, but sometimes it isn't all right and we'd be just the people to make a plan and have it upset.

But we should have talked it all out together before the last minute. I know we should have. Most couples do, I suppose. But we didn't. I couldn't seem to force myself to begin, and probably he never thought of it. But he should have thought of it when I said what if I had an expensive illness? And he just laughed and said he'd take a chance, I was pretty healthy. And that made me so angry I wouldn't have said

anything more about it if it had killed me. How could he be so stupid!

He isn't stupid. He isn't really cruel. He loves me and I love him and it will kill me to go on like this much longer without a word from him.

"Wasn't it a lovely picture?" said Miss Lark, mopping her eyes. "I feel foolish, crying about it when it turned out so beautifully."

She gave Edwina's hand a surreptitious squeeze.

"I'm grateful to you, my dear, for crying, too. It makes me less ashamed of myself."

When they reached the house, the telephone was ringing.

"Oh dear," said Miss Lark. "Winifred can't hear it, of course!"

She put on full speed.

Edwina's feet were leaden. He never wrote home; he telephoned or jumped on a bus. It could be. Two whole weeks without a word. She must hurry in case it was. She could hardly get up the steps. Only in dreams had she known such helplessness, such dragging weight, such frantic need to hurry and such dreadful inability to move.

"Oh, Miss Voorhis, it's long distance. My dear, it's for you."

It might be Mr. Pancoast.

I'll have to borrow from Miss Lark.

Darling, darling, I'm coming. I'll start instantly.

"Hello," she croaked. That wasn't her voice. Her throat was locked. A curious hoarse sound worked through, "Hello?"

"Hell's fire," shouted Lucas. "I want to speak to Edwina Voorhis! I told you that twice! Get her for me!"

She sobbed and laughed and nearly choked.

"Lucas, it's me."

"Is that you, toad? Speak up! What's the matter? Have you got the croup? And where the hell have you been all evening? I've been trying to get you ever since five o'clock."

"We didn't leave the house till nearly seven," her voice was clear again. How like him to scold because she wasn't in when he got around to calling after two weeks! "We went to the movies."

"Without me!" he said, aggrieved. "How could you? Have you no finer feelings? Leading a life of mad pleasure while I eat my heart out."

Whose heart did you say you'd been eating out?

"Where have you been these many days?" she asked, pleased with herself to be able to speak so coolly. He was apparently in tearing spirits. He should never be allowed to guess how frantic she had been.

"Out at the farm. The Matless boys and I went out to look the place over. The tenants left it in a mess. We cleaned it up and put a new roof on the ell. The mosquitoes ate us up alive but we had a swell time. It's the last vacation we'll have together. The Matlesses go into the Army next week."

"Did anyone forward my letters to you?"

"Hendry did but they must be in the village post office. I never thought to ask for mail. We only went to the village twice for supplies."

"You didn't get any of my letters?"

"Yes, one, the last one. I found it here at home and that's why I called you right away. Tell me what you said in the others."

"It would take too long."

"Well, how are you, Wee Willie?"

"Fine, now that I've heard from you. I began to wonder a little."

"We only went out to the farm to spend a couple of days," he said, "and we wouldn't have stayed this long if we hadn't found the ell roof falling in. We knew we'd better fix it before cold weather or the whole house would go to pieces. Pop hopes to rent it again and get at least enough to meet the taxes. You know, without the cows it's an awfully nice place to be. I wish I could have stayed longer but I have to register next Monday."

"Will you write to me as soon as you're settled?"

"Listen, darling," he said coaxingly, "I'm not much good at letters. Suppose I phone you once a week?"

"No!" she wailed. "No, Lucas! I want letters! They last longer. I want them terribly. Lucas, don't be mean."

"But hell," he said, "I can't spell. I'm not going to write letters to a schoolmarm and have them sent back red-penciled to be copied over."

He had just that moment thought of her being a schoolteacher. She could tell he was searching his fertile mind for excuses to get out of writing.

"Lucas, please," she would say just that and no more.

"Have you missed me, toad?"

"Yes."

"Do you love me?"

"Yes."

If he didn't want to write to her, he needn't.

"Are you sorry you took the job?"

"No."

"You like it?"

"Very much."

"That's what I was afraid of," he said. "I thought you'd

like it. You have all the makings of a first-class schoolmarm. High and mighty, dictatorial, self-willed—"

She was tempted to hang up. He wasn't being funny. He meant it.

"But I warn you," he said with disarming sweetness, "after we're married I shall wear the pants. You can't borrow them even for half an hour. They wouldn't fit you."

He broke off. Had he hung up? There had been no click of a replaced receiver.

"Lucas!" she cried.

"Get the hell out!" he said fiercely. "Go on! Beat it! Did you hear me? No, you can't speak to her. Hendry wants to know if you liked the snapshots, toad. You didn't say anything about them in your letter to him."

"Oh, I forgot to," she gasped. "Tell him thanks and I'll write him in detail. And give him my love."

"And what about me?"

"You get what's left."

He grunted.

"When are you coming down for a week-end?"

"Lucas, you know I can't. It would take me a whole week-end to go and come."

"What about Thanksgiving? You get four days, don't you?"

"But you get only one. We'd have only a few hours. It's too far and costs too much just for a few hours."

And we couldn't be alone more than a few minutes. I've been in your house at Thanksgiving and I know what it's like. Simply overrun.

"Besides, I'd be worn out when I got back here. It takes just about all the strength I've got to do my job."

"Oh, very well," he said. "I wouldn't want you to tire yourself."

He said it nastily. How could he understand fatigue? He was never tired.

She had told him plainly that she wouldn't be able to meet him at home for Thanksgiving. She had told him, and why, quite clearly before she left him. She had told Hendry and Lydia, too. Why did Lucas keep asking for what she couldn't agree to? It put her in a hateful position, having to refuse all the time and repeat the same arguments over and over. Either he didn't listen, or if he listened, he didn't remember the next minute; or if he remembered, he chose to pretend that he didn't.

"I'll see you at Christmas, Lucas."

"Can I count on that?"

"You know you can."

"All right," he said. "So long."

She heard the final click. She hung up her receiver. After the strain of the past two weeks and the different but equally wearing strain of the past few minutes, there was a let-down that felt almost like despair.

She ought to be wild with relief and happiness. She was. But she felt awful, too.

The kitchen door opened a few inches and Miss Lark peeped out.

"It wasn't bad news, I hope?"

"Oh no," said Edwina. "No indeed. It was very good. It was news from home. I've been rather anxious, not hearing."

The door opened wide and Miss Lark came into the hall. She was carrying a small round silver tray with two infinitely small frail glasses and two small round crackers.

"I thought you might like to try some of Winifred's rasp-

berry shrub. It's Mamma's recipe. It won't go to your head. But it will help you to relax. Papa used to take a little, now and then, just before bed."

Meekly Edwina accepted the offering.

What I need, she thought, is about a pint of whiskey. Straight. Without the cracker. But it would only make me as sick as a horse. And I'd lose my job.

6

THE door was plucked open.

"Oh," said Francy drearily. "It's you, Lucas."

For a split second she had been her old self, radiant with welcome. But the welcome, obviously, hadn't been meant for him. He was piqued. She didn't have to scream with joy but she might show a little decent friendliness.

"Sorry to disappoint you. Who'd you think it was?"

"Nobody," she said.

He walked past her into the living room and its emptiness, without Edwina, hit him in the face. It was one place, more than any other, where he expected to find her. She wasn't here.

He was used to Scott's absence. He might get used to hers. The first time in this room without her was bound to be the worst.

"I can only stop a minute. If you're expecting company, throw me out."

"I'm not expecting anyone," she said.

He looked at her sharply. She was lying. That lovely welcome had been meant for somebody. Why lie about it?

Her lack of friendliness was nothing new. It had distressed

Edwina in the summer. He remembered that. And there had been some sort of row in the bedroom, that last evening, the night before Edwina left. He was positive of it because when he had made the perfectly natural suggestion that the girls keep each other company till Scott came home, Edwina had had a fit.

If Francy was two-timing Scott—

"Whenever the bell rings," Francy said, "when I'm not expecting anybody, I always think maybe he's come home without letting me know beforehand, maybe when I open the door he'll be standing there. I always wait to the last minute before I open the door. Tonight I was almost positive. Your footsteps were so quick and light. He's taller and heavier than you are but he has a quick light step."

No two-timing. She hadn't room in her mind for anyone except Scott. Besides, with a secret love affair, she would look brighter.

"Fran, if you go on fretting like this, you'll be worse off than he is. You're nothing but bone and gristle. If you get any thinner, he'll need a magnifying glass to find you when he does come home."

She glanced up anxiously.

"Do I look so bad?"

"Horrible," he said.

That scared her. She didn't care what he thought, of course; only what Scott might think when he saw her again.

"I'll do something about it. I'll give up smoking and start drinking cream."

"You'd better send to your father-in-law for his series of booklets on how to build yourself up. You look as if you'd been using the series on how to tear yourself down."

"Don't joke about those booklets," she said. "I'd think they

were funny, too, if I weren't related to them."

"They made the old man a lot of money. I wouldn't dream of joking about the source of a lot of money."

"The source of a lot of humiliation for Scott."

"He shouldn't be so touchy about it."

"You'd be touchy if you'd been brought up the way he was."

"He didn't have such a bad time. No school until he was sixteen years old, and freedom to do exactly what he pleased."

"What his father pleased, you mean. No companionship but that horrid old man."

"His mother was on the premises all the time."

"That's about all she was. Do you know, she was never allowed to take care of him, even when he was a baby, or talk to him much, or show affection, or anything? And Mr. Collier never speaks to her except to give an order. She cleans the house and does the laundry and washes the dishes and shares her husband's bed at night and that's her entire life."

"If she didn't like it, she could leave, couldn't she? His second wife did. But I understand that one got tired of cooking and washing for twelve children, her own and those of the first Mrs. Collier, and that's why she left; she had no grudge against her husband except that he wouldn't put in electricity and buy her a washing machine. He was smart enough not to marry the third time until the first two batches of children were grown up and gone."

"He thinks a woman is just something to sleep with and have children by. He thinks Scott made a mistake in marrying me. He asked me all sorts of questions about my family tree and he was shocked when he found out that I was an only child and my mother was an only child and my father was one of two and his brother had only one child and that

a daughter. He thinks the stock has run out."

"Edwina and I will have a dozen," said Lucas, "and that will encourage him."

Her slight animation vanished. She wasn't interested in anyone but herself and Scott.

"Will you lend me your car till Tuesday, Fran? I haven't seen Edwina for quite a while and I thought I might drive up tonight."

"It will take you all night to get there, won't it? Yes, of course you can have the car. Keep it as long as you like."

"Till Tuesday will be long enough. I can spend tomorrow with her and drive back tomorrow night."

"Tomorrow's Monday. Won't she be in school?"

"If I can cut classes, I guess she can."

"But she won't," said Francy. "Especially not if you spring the idea on her. Why don't you call her up from here before you start?"

It wasn't a bad idea.

"Unless you think she'll tell you not to come," said Francy.

That annoyed him.

The call was put through quickly. Edwina's voice, warm and tremulous with excitement, sounded as if she were in the living room with Francy, only a wall away with the door ajar.

"Hello, Wee Willie!" he was excited, too.

"Oh, Lucas, where are you? At the dormitory?"

"No, I'm at Fran's. Want to hear some news? Lydia phoned about an hour ago. She'd just had a long incoherent telegram from Sloppy. It seems the girl is married."

"Elise married? Oh, Lucas! When? To which one?"

"George Ryan, Friday, in New York."

"Ryan? George? I never heard of him."

"Oh, you met him in August the last time you were at home. The time we had the corn roast."

"Was he one of those three boys she drove on with from New York? But which one? I never did get them sorted out."

"Don't you remember the little one, very good-looking, with glasses, two inches shorter than Sloppy and nearly two years younger, working for a Master's in psychology at Columbia? That's George. He's barely twenty. He must have started going to school before he was out of diapers. Very very bright. Elise has done all right for herself and for him, too. Apparently they're madly happy."

"Are your father and Lydia happy about her getting married like that without a word of warning?"

"Oh, sure. Why not? It saved them the price of a wedding. They'd met George and liked him."

"They like almost anyone. But did they know she was thinking of marrying him?"

"She didn't know it herself till she did it, I guess. She decided one minute and was married the next. If you ask me, toad, that's the way to get married; impulsively; act first and think afterward; if you think too much beforehand you think up difficulties and you don't act, but if you act first the difficulties take care of themselves afterward; they have to."

Her voice was farther away and cooler, "You mean somebody else has to take care of the difficulties. Has George an income?"

"He has an allowance from his father, enough to keep him, and Elise has hers from Pop. She's going to give up the dancing lessons and take shorthand and typing instead."

"For a secretarial job?"

"Oh no. To help George with his thesis."

"I see," she said. "Well, thanks for letting me know right

away. I'll send her a present."

"Toad!" he said. "I'm coming up to have breakfast with you."

"What?"

"Fran's lending me her car. I'm starting right now."

"Don't be silly!" she said.

"I'll get there about seven. Have the coffee on."

"You're out of your mind," she said.

"I have been, ever since you left. You shouldn't have left me. I can't eat or sleep or settle down to work. If I flunk out at mid-term, you'll know why. I want to see you, darling. Don't you want to see me?"

"Yes," she said, "I do, but not on a Monday morning that isn't a holiday. Besides, it's been raining here all day and it's turned very cold tonight and the roads are like glass. There was an accident near the Junction a little while ago. A bus skidded and turned over. Don't you dare to drive up tonight, Lucas."

"I'll wait till morning, then. I'll start with the sun. We can have a late luncheon together. You can skip school in the afternoon."

"I can't skip school, Lucas. I'd lose my job."

"So much the better. You can come back with me."

"I'm not going to argue any more!" she said. "This call has cost a fortune already."

"See you tomorrow, darling!"

"No!" she said. "I don't want you to come!"

"You don't want to see me?"

"I can wait until Christmas," she said. "I'd rather."

He hung up.

"I won't need the car after all, Fran."

All she said was, "When are you going home again?"

"I don't know. Probably not until Thanksgiving."

Elise and George would be up before that, but he didn't want to see them. He couldn't remember ever having been so low in his mind. He was grateful to Francy for asking no question about Edwina. He was sunk too low even to quarrel.

"When you're home at Thanksgiving, will you do something for me? It won't take more than a few minutes of your time and it would mean a lot to me, Lucas. There's nobody else I can ask. Will you go out and call on Scott's parents and find out what he's written them, if anything?"

Would he! He would not.

"Scott wouldn't be likely to write his father anything he hadn't already written to you, Fran."

"He might. If he weren't getting better, he might tell his father so. His father is paying the bills. Scott would feel he had a right to know."

"You'd have a better right. His own wife."

"But he won't tell me anything that he thinks will worry me and he hates talking about his health. All last spring, when I knew he wasn't sleeping and I thought from the way his eyes looked that he must have a headache nearly all the time, he wouldn't admit that he wasn't in perfect condition. I had to stop asking how he felt because I could see it irritated him. You'd be like that, you know, if all the time you were growing up you'd had somebody hounding you about your health, the way his father did, always fussing over you; either you'd refuse to speak about it at all or you'd go to the other extreme and turn into a hypochondriac."

"No, I wouldn't," said Lucas. "Not me. I'd have bopped the old man on the head and walked out."

"You!" she said. "I'm not talking about you."

"I thought you were," said Lucas.

She was annoyed. That pleased him. She used to have spirit. Lethargy wasn't becoming to her. He resented lethargy in anyone.

"I don't know how Edwina stands you," Francy said.

She crushed out her cigarette and opened the box beside her. It was empty.

"Here," said Lucas.

She shook her head.

"I have plenty. A whole carton."

She found it in a table drawer and tore off the paper wrapping. There was viciousness in the way her long shiny red-purple fingernails ripped the paper. As if she'd like to scratch my face, he thought, amused.

He watched her idly. She had on a tight-fitting dark purple dress and from the side she looked too flat to be human. Not much thicker through than an ironing board. Elise was as tall and didn't carry much weight but she curved. You had to hand it to Francy, though; with no looks to speak of, she certainly got herself up well. Elise had the looks but she was always a little frowsy, and her clothes were thrown on. It was to be hoped that George wasn't old-maidish; Sloppy would give him fits.

"Lucas, will you see Mr. Collier, please? It isn't much to ask of you."

"Why don't you go and see him yourself, Fran? You're Scott's wife. I'm not. The old man wouldn't give me confidential information."

"He might. You're Scott's closest friend. You're a man. He respects men. He thinks women are scum."

"Oh, now, Fran."

"Well, he thinks they're sub-human, about the lowest order, less important than his goats and chickens and ducks

and much less efficient than his damned bees. I've seen the way he treats his wife and you might think he'd have some respect and consideration for her if only because she gave him Scott. I can't expect consideration as Scott's wife; I haven't produced even one son."

"You misjudge the old man, Francy. After all you've seen him only once. One week-end right after you were married, and you haven't set foot on the place since."

"I would have gone but Scott wouldn't take me! I'd go anywhere with him, any time. But he knows how queer that household seems to anyone who's accustomed to normal family life. He wouldn't subject me to the discomfort of any more visits. He had the excuse of working so hard that he never could take time off to go home. But I would have gone with him gladly."

She would have, too. Lucas knew that. She would have paid a visit to hell and never whimpered if Scott had asked her to and gone with her. The Collier establishment wasn't hell but it was peculiar. Curd cheese and honey for breakfast, with goat's milk instead of poisonous coffee or tea. Nuts and raisins and grated raw vegetables for the other meals, with perhaps the white of an egg and lemon juice for dessert, or as a special treat, olive oil, taken straight, without soda or ice. The old lady, who looked rather like the white of an egg and no wonder, never appeared at the table.

"I don't blame you for not wanting to make any prolonged visits there, Fran, but if you think the old man may have some news that you haven't heard, why don't you drive out some afternoon and call? You could say you were just driving through town and wanted to pay your respects. You could pump the old man without his suspecting it. You're

smart, even if he doesn't think so. He wouldn't have a chance against you."

Her mouth drooped at the corners, not sullenly, but in despair. He had never seen such a tragic mouth. It should have been grotesque, those wide lips painted such a dark and violent color, but it wasn't; it was tragic.

He was sorry for her but he had no intention of paying a call on old Mr. Collier. He would only get his ear talked off and not about Scott but about the horrors of a meat diet or the sex life of bees.

"You won't help me. You're completely selfish, aren't you, Lucas? You're not interested in anything that doesn't concern you personally and what doesn't interest you isn't worth even ten minutes of your time. I did think you cared a little about Scott, though, and I should think you'd go and see his parents for his sake if not for mine."

He laughed. She was a fine one to start lecturing him. She was about as black a little kettle of self-interest as ever rebuked a pot.

"You can't get around me that way. I'm onto you. But your father-in-law isn't. Go and do a job on him. I'll tell you, go home with me for Thanksgiving. Mother would be delighted to have you. She's always wanted to meet you. All last year she kept wishing that Edwina and I could bring you and Scott for a week-end but naturally you couldn't visit us when his parents lived in the same town or just outside it. With Scott away, though, it's a little different; you'd go to your own people for holidays and Edwina is all the people you have handy by, and Edwina naturally would stay with us so why not you, too? You could explain that, casually, to Mr. Collier when you went out in the afternoon to pay your call. You could say that of course you wouldn't dream of

spending a day in the same town with Scott's father without dropping in to see him. It would flatter the old buzzard."

She made a little inarticulate sound, her lips derisive.

"Oh, he's human, Fran! He isn't proof against flattery. He isn't proof against an attractive woman. He may pretend to despise women but don't forget he married three of them, and all three treated him shabbily; the first died young, the second deserted him, and the third gave him one puny son when he wanted half a dozen to gladden his old age."

"Scott isn't puny," she said.

"No, but he was. Mother says it's a wonder he lived to grow up. You owe your handsome husband to the care the old man took of him."

"He grew up strong in spite of his father's fussing, not because of it."

"Francy, Francy, I believe you're jealous of the old man just because Scott's fond of him."

"He isn't fond of him! He hates him. I know he does and why wouldn't he? Brought up in such a queer way, wearing nothing but shoes and a loincloth till he was sixteen, with no companions but animals, and studying Greek and Latin and weaving and botany from the time he could talk, with nobody to teach him but that self-educated old crank, and then thrown into a big public highschool to find out that other people thought his precious father was a freak and expected him to be a freak, too. Nobody has a right to experiment on a child and bring him up to be different from other children."

Lucas was pleased to see her stirred up. A little adrenalin let loose in her system improved her immensely.

"You talk to Mother about the Colliers when you're with us at Thanksgiving. She's seen something of them both because she's tried to get Mrs. Collier to join various clubs and

when there's money to be raised for any good cause Mother's the one to do it; she's unbeatable at money-raising; what she doesn't know about the cause she makes up for in enthusiasm; and she always makes a point of seeing Mr. Collier among the first on the sucker list; he's extremely generous. He's extremely polite to her, too. She's an attractive woman."

"And she's had five healthy children," said Francy tartly.

He must get Francy home for Thanksgiving. Lydia would be entranced. Her curiosity about Scott's wife was insatiable.

"You will come, Fran? Mother will phone you. She won't write you a note because she never writes to anybody. But you will come, won't you?"

She was half persuaded. But only half.

"It would please Scott if you went to see his father, Fran. I know it would. He wouldn't dream of asking you to do it, but if you went of your own accord and wrote him about it, he'd be pleased."

That did it.

"He might be pleased. All right, Lucas. Thank you. And don't bother your mother to phone me. If you're sure she'd be willing for me to come, we can drive out in my car. You can drive."

"It's a deal," he said and clapped her on the back. "You'll have Scott's father eating his grated carrots out of your hand."

Driving out would be pleasanter than going on the bus, and Batty and Fitz could sit in the rumble.

Incidentally, persuadability was a very attractive quality in a woman.

7

THE bedroom was appallingly cold. If it was this cold at the end of October, what would it be like in January? The storm windows might as well be cheesecloth. The wind came in around them if not through them, and through Edwina's heavy bathrobe and sweater and down into her wool socks and played around her ankles. She brought her galoshes from the closet and put them on. She finished correcting the weekly stack of themes and fastened them together with an elastic to be taken to school in the morning.

She took Lucas' letter from her bathrobe pocket and read it again. It was the second she had had from him. He had spoken truly when he had said he wasn't much good at letters. Fluent, ardent, vehement, always interesting, at least to her, when he talked face to face, how could he be so stilted and dull on paper? Not even her need could read anything between the lines. She had waited and watched and all but prayed for a love letter. She had received something that was a combination timetable and weather report. He had been to such and such classes, seen so and so, worked in the lab, yesterday was hot, tonight was cold. His large rangy handwriting filled several pages without telling her much of anything.

Anybody would think he was afraid to put emotion on paper lest she sue him.

Well, no matter. She was going to live with him after this winter and most of next. She wouldn't need letters from him. Until then she could live on husks and like it or starve. But the dullness of his letters made writing back rather difficult. He didn't refer to anything in her letters or answer any of her questions. Didn't he read her letters? Or wasn't he interested in the life she led apart from him?

The second letter did have one morsel of news. Francy was going to his family for Thanksgiving.

I'm jealous, thought Edwina. They'll all ride out together the night before, Francy and Lucas and Batty and Fitz. Or will they wait till Thursday morning? He doesn't say. Perhaps Batty and Fitz will wait over for the game. He doesn't say. Dinner will be whenever they all get there, maybe not until ten in the evening. I could get there by ten in the evening. I wonder if Elise and George Ryan will be there. He doesn't say. He doesn't say anything except that Francy's going. And I'll be stuck here with Miss Lark and Winifred and Papa's ghost.

Christmas came reasonably soon after Thanksgiving. She must fix her mind on Christmas. If she had something good in the future, something she could be sure of, to look forward to, she could endure the present.

Francy would have a fine time on Thanksgiving whether she meant to or not. Everybody had a good time in that house. The visit would lift Francy out of her rut and make her forget her unhappiness for a little while. Lucas didn't say how she was or what she had heard from Scott.

How cold the room was. Papa had minded heat but apparently he had never objected to cold. Miss Lark kept the ther-

letter because you'd borrow Francy's car and come, cut classes when you can't afford to, drive all night both ways, be tired out and not fit for work, if you didn't go to sleep at the wheel and run into someone.

"The Theriaults will be delighted to come," said Miss Lark at dinner.

"That's very nice," said Edwina.

She sat with Miss Lark in the parlor for an hour after dinner. She held a book open, without reading it, while Miss Lark went through the evening paper.

He would have driven up that Sunday night if she hadn't protested. He was a good driver. He had never had an accident. Batty was the one who had smashed up the car. A wonder he hadn't killed himself and Justine, too. Nineteen and no judgment. That was why they called him Batty; because he was. Fitz had a more reliable head, if less brute strength. Ten months younger. "Everybody kept asking if they were twins," Lydia said, "because they were almost of a size, and I got tired of it so I said yes, with different fathers, but Hendricks said I'd better not, somebody might believe me. And then Batty got his growth and his hair turned brown, so it was all right." Lydia would say anything.

Miss Lark's head was shaking and shaking.

"Is the war news bad tonight?" Edwina asked.

It was always bad.

"How can they act so?" sighed Miss Lark. "Why do they? If they'd just stay at home and behave themselves and let other people do the same. I'm thankful Papa isn't alive to know what's going on. He was sure the last war had settled everything, although he was very much disturbed when we didn't join the League."

He may be in the Army before next winter. That's what

Francy said. She said, "If he enlists and gets killed, what will you have to look forward to?"

She didn't mean it. She didn't really think we'd get into the war. She was only trying to hurt me.

Scott talked that way the whole spring. He said what was the use of making yourself into a scholar in a world where scholars were machine-gunned and libraries burned to the ground. He said it was the end of civilization. He thought he was the only person who realized what was happening and what it meant, but he didn't try to do anything about it, he just talked himself into a nervous collapse that landed him in the infirmary with high blood pressure and a severe case of shingles in the head and eyes.

"We always have bread sauce with capon," said Miss Lark. "Papa liked it the way Winifred makes it, quite thick, with the onions cooked to nothing."

The Wednesday afternoon before Thanksgiving dragged interminably. When the last bell finally rang and the classroom emptied, she took a long time to collect her papers and books and put on her coat. The Pancoast house must be in a fine state of pre-party dither, with Hendry sweeping things off table-tops and into drawers to create an appearance of tidiness. He and Lydia were expert at last-minute cleaning up but you never could find anything for days afterward.

At Miss Lark's tomorrow would be like any other day, or rather, like a Sunday. Dinner at one instead of at night and guests.

There was nothing to hurry home for.

Everybody else had something to hurry home for. The hall was almost deserted when she went through it to the side entrance. She stopped to button up her coat. The air was sharp. She went down the three steps and stopped dead.

On the sidewalk, on his stomach, lay a small boy with a camera. Hendry! she thought with a rush of homesickness. Any camera equipped with boy meant Hendry to her.

"Hold it!" he said.

Her homesickness had started hallucinations. The gleeful voice was Hendry's. It couldn't be.

He scrambled up.

"Boy, what a picture!"

He bent double, agonized with laughter.

"Hendry!" she said.

It couldn't be. It was.

"Your mouth was open a mile. It looks little but it sure can stretch. Your tonsils showed as clear as day and some of your gullet. What made you so slow coming out? We've been hanging around for ages. Mother's watching the other door. She was going in after you but I wanted to get a picture of you when you first saw us and it wouldn't have been so good indoors."

She could have kissed him, she was so glad to see him, but he might not have liked it.

"How did you get here?"

"Drove. Pop had the car fixed. Mom was spending so much on taxis he thought he might as well. We started at five this morning. I drove most of the way. Any time we got hungry we had a hot dog or a hamburger and tonic. I must have gallons of tonic inside me. Can you hear me splash?"

He ran to the corner of the building and bawled, "Here she is, Mom!" and ran back, his new long tan corduroy pants squeaking.

"How do you like my whistle pants? I'm training them to whistle Yankee Doodle."

His brown eyes sparkled. His silky brown hair lay flat. His

red plaid lumberjack shirt was filthy but his face was clean.

"Get a move on," he tugged at her arm. "We have to start back. Say, do you know what the man said to the bathtub?"

As she reached the corner, a step ahead of him, Lydia came around it and they fell into each other's arms.

"Darling, are you surprised to see us?"

Her conical gray fur hat fell off. Edwina picked it up.

"Surprised!" said Hendry. "I'll say she was. Wait till you see the picture I took of her. Mother, as soon as we get outside town, I'm going to drive."

"Edwina's going to drive the first while," said Lydia. "Won't you, darling? I only let him drive in the open country, Edwina, and if a cop was hiding in ambush and caught us I was going to say Hendry was my brother aged thirty but stunted because of pituitary trouble. I got that out of my course on glandular deficiencies and I figured it would set any cop back on his heels except our Mr. Malone at home because Mrs. Malone took the course with me. Come along, darling."

Under her gray fur jacket was a yellow tweed dress; its hem was coming out in the back, and her fingertips were coming through her green knitted gloves. Her ash-and-silver hair was superbly waved. The cold had put a little color in the hollows of her cheeks and there was always natural red in her thin lips. She was forty-seven and had had five children and her figure had flattened in places and thickened in others, but she still had the carriage and confident air of a beautiful woman and the elasticity of a much younger one.

"Does Lucas know you were coming to get me, Lydia?"

"It's to be a surprise," said Lydia. "He's bringing your cousin, did he write you? I thought of inviting Scott's parents but Hen put his foot down because Mr. Collier wouldn't eat

anything we had, he'd bring half a dozen raw eggs and suck them at the table or something. So we're just having the Flocks from next door, and Justine's people, and Batty and Fitz are bringing out four freshmen who live on the west coast; the boys are staying to see the Thanksgiving game so they'll be quite late."

"Lucas isn't going to the game?"

"Oh no. He'll be out in the morning. You drive, darling."

It was exciting to be behind the wheel of a car again, especially that car. Even the smell of the worn red leather upholstery was familiar, and intoxicating because it was. Hendry, in back, was breathing down her neck.

"Is this where you live? I want to see," he said when she stopped in front of Miss Lark's.

"I want to see, too," said Lydia.

Miss Lark was out. Hendry took an inventory of the house plants and bric-a-brac while Edwina scribbled a note and Lydia talked to her.

"You needn't pack a bag, darling. Hendry's pyjamas will fit you perfectly and I bought a gross of toothbrushes at the last one-cent sale because people are always staying the night with us unexpectedly and nobody likes to wake up in the morning with his mouth like a parrot's cage. Besides, Hen says there's going to be a shortage of bristles. But I didn't know that when I bought the toothbrushes so it wasn't hoarding."

"How's Mr. Pancoast?"

"Hen? He's wonderful. He says we'll be in the poorhouse after he pays the next income tax. Three boys in college means quite a financial strain. Oh, Fitz has a new girl. A redhead. We haven't met her yet. She's at Mt. Holyoke."

"Will Elise and George be at home for Thanksgiving?"

"No, they're spending it with his father. I told them to bring him along but he has only the one day. They'll bring him at Christmas."

"Is Elise happy?"

"Madly. Marriage has made her over, or George has. She's almost tidy. He told her that if she was going to sleep in his bedroom she had to hang up her clothes instead of throwing them on the floor, and he's made her give up those baggy sweaters. Are you ready, darling? Then let's be on our way."

Edwina left the note on the telephone table beside the Pliny's Doves.

The car shot forward. Midas was left behind.

"How is he, Lydia?"

"Who? Lucas? Oh, in bad shape."

"What do you mean? Is he ill?"

"Oh no. Just sunk. He came home two week-ends and I never saw such gloom. It was absolutely tangible and it was everywhere. It filled the entire house. We kept tripping over it and picking pieces of it out of the food."

"Was anything special the matter?"

"You, of course, darling. Aren't you something special? For a whole year he had you within easy reach and now he can't find you anywhere. I know how he feels. I felt exactly the same when Hen went back to camp after we'd been married a week. Widowed. Don't you feel widowed, away from Lucas?"

"Yes," said Edwina, gratefully.

She could be sure that Lydia wasn't hinting a criticism of her for having deserted Lucas. Lydia was incapable of hinting, and usually she was able to see your point of view as well as her own or that of her children, or if she didn't see it, at least she readily acknowledged that you might have a point

of view, and if she liked you, she took for granted that your behavior, whether she understood it or not, was rational.

"I should think it would be even harder to be separated after marriage," said Edwina.

"I don't know," said Lydia. "Honestly, I can't remember what anything was like before marriage. And it isn't just because I've been married so long. When I'd been married a week, I felt as if I'd been married forever."

She gave an exclamation of dismay.

"I've just thought of something frightful!"

Hendry bounced forward.

"What, Mother?"

"Oh dear," said Lydia. "Oh dear! Listen, both of you, swear solemnly that you won't tell Hendricks until tomorrow's over."

"I swear," said Hendry.

Edwina murmured.

"Tomorrow's his birthday," said Lydia. "His fiftieth. He's been dreading it. He feels about it the way a woman feels about reaching thirty. You know; senile; doddering. Only the point is, if you don't think about it, you feel exactly the same as you did when you were twenty-five. He mustn't be allowed to think about it until it's over. I'm certain he won't if nobody reminds him. Its being Thanksgiving will put him off. He never had a birthday on Thanksgiving before. Thanksgiving coming a week early is enough to confuse anyone. It's a good thing we almost never remember birthdays in our family, isn't it? But fifty is really a noble age. I shan't at all mind reaching fifty. I used to think that the only thing that would make it tolerable would be pure white hair, very nicely waved, and a tiara. But I haven't any place to wear a tiara to. I'd look pretty silly walking into a meeting of the

Garden Club with one on."

"How old are you, Mom?" asked Hendry.

"I'll be forty-eight in December. People born in my part of December are supposed to have the gift of prophecy, did you know that? Somebody reviewed a book on astrology at one of our Book Club meetings last summer. But I don't believe in it because I hadn't the faintest intimation about Elise and George. What I do believe in is George and his tests."

Hendry giggled.

"She got George to give her a lot of intelligence tests, Edwina."

"I got him to send them to me, and I gave them to myself," said Lydia, "and then he graded them. I'd always wanted to find out if I had any intelligence, and while I didn't think I was an idiot you never know and it would be an awful thing to find out at my age; you wouldn't want it to get around; so it's a comfort to have a psychologist right in the family. George was much impressed and so was I. He put me in the genius class."

"But you didn't do them right," said Hendry. "You didn't time yourself and timing is part of it."

"How could I time myself?" asked his mother. "Some of our clocks are fast and some are slow and I couldn't phone Central every time I took a test because our phone bill is simply staggering as it is and Hen says we've got to cut down. I was days and days doing the tests in what odd moments I had. You know how I hate writing anything, Edwina. But I drove myself to it, bit by bit. And the results were well worth it."

"You weren't supposed to look things up in the dictionary," said Hendry, "and you weren't supposed to get help from people. You asked Pop a lot of the answers."

"My dear child," said his mother, "intelligence isn't merely what you have filed in your head, it's knowing where to find information and how to use it. I'm a genius and I almost wish I hadn't found it out because it imposes a certain amount of responsibility. I've got to run the house better from now on. Shall we stop for some hot food?"

When they came out of the diner, the November darkness had dropped down and November cold had penetrated the car. The heater wasn't working but there were plenty of rugs.

"I want to drive," said Hendry.

"Let me," said Edwina. "I haven't had my hands on a car in months. I love it. Please let me."

He would argue the hind legs off anyone else, but when she coaxed he gave in at once. He wrapped himself in rugs and lay down on the back seat.

"I wish I had Canfield to keep my stomach warm. I wish we'd brought him, Mother."

"But he doesn't like riding," said Lydia. "He gets hysterical and claws at the windows."

"How's his digestion?" asked Edwina.

"Fine," said Hendry. "He had breakfast with us. We ate in the kitchen at half past four, and Pop came down in his bathrobe and had coffee with us and went back to bed after we left, and Canfield sat up to the table on a chair and ate bits of bacon as neatly as anyone."

"He licked the butter. That wasn't neat," said Lydia.

Hendry went to sleep.

"Getting tired?" asked Lydia. "Want me to take it?"

"Oh no. I love driving. I'll say when I'm tired."

How could I be tired or cold? I'm going to Lucas.

He missed her. He was widowed without her. She would

take his head on her breast and comfort him.

Every dark mile was taking her to him. Clusters of lights that were villages rushed to meet the car and were left behind. Midas was far behind. Miss Lark and Papa and the brick house and the highschool and Miss Voorhis, the assistant in English, were left far behind, almost forgotten.

"These have been the strangest months, Lydia. I've been somebody else, not me. I dreaded the job. You have no idea how much I dreaded it. But from the first evening I landed in Midas, I seemed to be somebody else. I've been able to do what I had to do, but it wasn't me doing it. My private self doesn't seem to exist in Midas except when I'm alone in my bedroom or walking along the street alone. I haven't even worn my ring. The students are terribly inquisitive and they notice everything and I didn't want the other teachers asking personal questions. I didn't want to be made selfconscious. If I thought about Lucas or my private self in school hours, I couldn't teach. Not even Miss Lark knows about Lucas. I've told her about the rest of you but not about him. I like her; we have every meal together; we go to the movies together nearly every week and to church on Sunday; I'm really fond of her; but she isn't a person you take down your back hair with. You simply can't imagine her with her hair down or her corset off, either figuratively or literally. You can't imagine her in her nightgown or in her bath. She always sits in a straight-backed chair without crossing her knees or even her ankles. If she lounged in an easy chair, the top-edge of her corset would cut into her overhang. I don't think she goes to bed at night; her hair-do is too elaborate; I think she sits up in a straight-backed chair, with her hands in her lap, and the braids and puffs and combs and big bone pins all in place, waiting for morning."

"Goodness, I wish I'd seen her," said Lydia.

"In a way, she's companionable. She doesn't try to boss me or talk down to me because I'm so much younger. She talks to me as if we were the same age, about forty, settled and long past love affairs. I can't talk to her about Lucas. I can't talk about him to anyone in Midas, and much of the time I feel not so much widowed as the other way around, as if Lucas were very much alive, somewhere, while my private self, the real me that belongs to him, had temporarily died. You've brought me to life again, Lydia. It's wonderful."

Lydia gave her a little pat.

"You love him a lot, don't you? You and he belong just the way Hendricks and I do. I'm not so sure about Elise and George but I think he can handle her if anyone can. If she behaves too badly, he can stop treating her like a wife and treat her like a case and that ought to fix her."

After months of silence about herself and Lucas, Edwina felt an impulse to confide. Apart from the family like this, with Hendry, the only one close by, lost in sleep, Lydia seemed agreeably detached, and the car rushing through darkness was leaving yesterday far behind and tomorrow was still far ahead. Time and space fell away.

"Lucas wanted me to marry him the way Elise married George, suddenly, the night before I went to Midas. He was terribly hurt, and angry with me, I think, because I refused to. And I was angry with him for asking such a thing of me."

"Oh, were you? Why?" asked Lydia, sounding puzzled.

"It would have had to be a secret. I couldn't have married and kept my job. They don't employ married women. I think he would have liked it if I'd lost my job."

"Well, darling, you could have come to us," said Lydia blithely.

Useless to expect her to understand. Her marriage had been so different. A wartime marriage, yes, with Hendricks likely to be sent away any time, but always her own people to take care of her, all those Fitzgeralds with their money. Well, they hadn't any money now.

"Besides," Edwina made an effort, "I was afraid of having a baby. You weren't afraid of that when you married, were you? Probably you wanted one as soon as possible because Hendricks was going to war."

"Oh, I was furious," said Lydia. "I started Lucas instantly, and my second sister was planning a huge wedding and I was to be matron of honor and the dresses were heavenly but didn't allow for bulges."

Her scream of laughter woke Hendry.

"Are we home?"

"Not yet, darling. Go back to sleep. I was just remembering how I looked when the dresses came home and I tried mine on. There simply wasn't room in one dress for both Lucas and me."

"I want to drive," said Hendry.

"No, I'll drive," said Lydia. "Stop the car, darling, and I'll drive, and Hendry can come in front with us. We'll be warmer with three of us in front."

Edwina stopped the car. Her confidences had been stopped, too. It was just as well.

8

In the hall outside her door, a board squeaked. That would be Hendry going down to the basement to let Canfield out. It must be about seven.

Hendry was the family alarm clock. He waked early and he liked things to get going and he thoroughly enjoyed routing out the other members of the household. Lydia had always declined the responsibility of getting her children out of bed and off to school. She had told them flatly, when they were small, "If you're tardy all the time or don't go to school at all, you'll grow up ignoramuses and nobody will have anything to do with you, including me. I love you but if you think I'm going to let myself be all wound up in apron strings, you're mistaken."

The mornings had been terrible, a mad scramble with everybody fighting for the bathroom, until Hendry graduated from a fenced-in crib to a real bed from which he could escape. From then on he organized the early mornings. On week-days he waked his father first because Mr. Pancoast was deliberate and liked plenty of time to scrub and shave, uninterrupted. Batty and Fitz were next because they hated getting up and it was Hendry's only authorized opportunity

to work his will upon them. Lucas came after them, and then his mother; she and Lucas were demons for speed. Elise was left to the last because if she got the bathroom ahead of the boys, everybody was late to school; besides, she left it in a state of chaos and nobody was willing to pick up after her.

On week-days, having waked his father, Hendry went down to let out the cat. On holidays, if he had waked anybody, he would have been murdered. On holidays, Canfield was his only comfort in the early morning unless Edwina happened to be awake.

She lay watching the doorknob. On her first morning in the house she had waked from uneasy sleep, after a night disturbed by Elise's thrashing about and muttering, to see the doorknob turning cautiously. The door had opened a half inch, an inch, two inches, three, and a furry black monster had leaped upon her. Nothing but lack of breath had kept her from shrieking. Hendry had peered around the door and seeing her open-eyed had darted in to sit on the edge of the bed, sociable and at ease in striped pyjamas and a windbreaker.

"I thought you might like to have Canfield with you your first morning. I thought he'd make you feel at home. He always gets into bed with me and laps my arm while Pop's in the bathroom. He's a very lapping cat. You can have him this time because you're a visitor."

He had stayed until Canfield settled down on Edwina's chest, fifteen pounds of warm purring cat. Then he had swooped on his sister in the other bed, blown in her ear, dodged the hurled pillow, and departed.

There he was. The board squeaked again. The doorknob turned. The door opened three inches, Canfield squeezed through, and leaped upon the bed.

There was a betraying giggle outside the door.

"I'm awake," said Edwina, and Hendry poked his head in.

"You want to see something I'm making for you?"

She nodded.

"I'll get it."

He disappeared. She moved her feet under the blanket and Canfield made a few half-hearted passes at them. He was much less lively than a year ago. Old age and weight were slowing him down. It was queer that a black cat stayed black even in old age when people grayed or whitened. He had a small patch of white beside his nose, which gave his face a lopsided look, but he had had that from birth.

He walked up her and settled on her solar plexus and began to lap her wrist. The rough pink tongue moved scratchily and methodically along her forearm to her elbow. It wasn't love. He liked the salt on her skin, Hendry said. He was more affectionate than most cats, though, and more gregarious, really fond of company. In his spry young cathood he had liked to play a lone hand, but years of living with the Pancoasts had had their effect and his name no longer applied. It was, of course, too late to change it.

He finished her arm, trod out a place beside her, curled up, rumbled a while, and slept.

Hendry was taking a long time to find what he wanted to show her.

His bringing his cat to her on her first morning had been a gesture of remarkable friendliness. Lydia, hearing of it, congratulated her.

"Whom Hendry loves, God loves. I won't say that if he hadn't liked you he could have kept Lucas from marrying you, but I can say, on authority, that he could have made life hellish for you whenever you came to see us. If you're at all

sensitive, that is. I don't mean pulling chairs from under you or putting snakes in your bed; he outgrew that years ago. But some people have actually stopped coming to the house because of him. He'll sit for an hour staring at some particular part of you, or he'll break into a guffaw when you've said something serious, or he'll just come up and smell of you and then shudder. He's been working on Justine a long time but she's used to him and very tough. She's his great failure."

He came in with an old brown silk dressing gown of Fitz' over his pyjamas. It bloused mightily and the sleeves were folded back in deep cuffs. He was short and stocky like Fitz and inherited some of the clothes.

He dumped a big black album on the bed.

"I had to stop and paste in the last ones. It isn't full yet but I expect it will be by Christmas. I'm making it for your Christmas present but I thought you'd like to see it now."

She opened it.

"Hendry, what beautiful printing. Did you do it yourself?"

She turned the page.

"They aren't all of me, are they?"

"All of them," he said with satisfaction. "When there was anybody else in the picture I cut off that part."

The album represented much labor. The snapshots were arranged with care and neatly pasted. The dates and comments were very fancy. She was impressed. She was embarrassed. Page after page of herself, herself, herself. A collection of group snapshots would have been more than welcome. But you couldn't say, "It's a lovely gift only I'd rather have something different."

Hendry was beaming at her.

"Do you like it? I thought you would."

"You've put a lot of work into it, Hendry."

He put his finger on a page.

"See that one? I enlarged it and sent it to a contest but it didn't win. It didn't even get honorable mention. It ought to have. It's a good picture."

He prodded Canfield.

"Wake up, there. You've slept enough."

Canfield yawned.

"He sleeps a lot because he's old. I don't see why old people sleep so much. Pop and Mother are still asleep. You aren't going to sleep any more, are you, Edwina? Come on downstairs and we'll have breakfast."

He picked Canfield up by the tail.

"I wish you wouldn't do that!" she exclaimed.

"But he likes it," said Hendry. "He expects it."

He set the cat down again, raised him again by the tail, dropped him.

"You see? He likes it. I've done it ever since I can remember and he's never minded. He has a very strong tail."

He set Canfield on his shoulder.

"Come on downstairs, Edwina."

"I'll be down in a little while," she said. "I want to look through the album again."

He went off with his cat.

She lay with her arm around the book. The room was warm. How lovely to wake up in a warm bedroom. Elise's bedroom. It was strange to look across to the other bed and see it flat and neat. It ought to be a tangle of coverings with Elise inside, nothing of her showing but a hank of silvery hair or perhaps, at the other end, her narrow naked feet.

It was strange to think of Elise as married and sleeping with George Ryan. How did he deal with her when she cried out in her sleep and thrashed about or left her bed to wander about the room?

She had married the first man she fell in love with and she hadn't waited and planned and worried about finances and she was madly happy and if anyone worried, it was her father and George or George's father.

Well, that was fine if you had a father. But your husband's family were not your own, no matter how dearly you loved them. You hadn't the same right to land on them and expect them to look after you.

Lucas shouldn't have expected it. He ought to want to take care of his wife. He ought to be willing to postpone marriage until he could be responsible for a wife and possibly a child.

But there was something to be said for Lucas' attitude.

They wouldn't have minded having me here this winter, she thought. They seem to like having me around. They're used to a houseful and with nobody left at home but Hendry they might have been glad to have me. I wouldn't have cost them anything. I don't eat much and I have clothes enough to last me for quite some time.

But I couldn't have done it. I'm not their child, and it isn't as if I were incapable of earning my own living.

It wouldn't have worked. For them it might, but not for me. It isn't as if they were awfully well off. They spend every penny of Mr. Pancoast's salary before it's earned, even. They never catch up with the bills. They've got to see Batty and Fitz through college and then Hendry. And when Lucas gets out of the Army, it may be months before he really begins to earn anything. I'll take care of myself. I'll work till

I drop. But I won't let Mr. Pancoast support me. Father would turn in his grave if I did.

From breakfast on she kept expecting Lucas and Francy. By noon they hadn't arrived. Half the day gone. If only Lydia had told him, she thought. If only she had told him she was going to drive over to Midas and bring me back, he would have come earlier. I'm sure he would.

The house smelled of sage and onions and Lydia's carnation bath salts. Lydia, from the tub, was screaming down to Hendry who stood in the lower hall, screaming back. Edwina went down to the basement to sit with Mr. Pancoast. If she stopped watching the front door and the street, Lucas might come.

"Sit here," invited Mr. Pancoast, putting aside his book. He raised himself from his rocking chair by slow degrees.

"It's your chair," she said. "I'm not company. I'll take the footstool."

"Dusty," he said. "Spoil your dress. Sit here."

He lowered himself to the footstool and folded his hands over his firm round stomach. He wasn't a fat man but he was broad and solid, with thick muscular arms and legs. His face was brown-and-ruddy with full firm cheeks, his nose blunt, his mouth genial. From the top of his broad head the thinning hair lifted in brown transparent fluff.

"I don't want to interrupt anything," said Edwina. "Go on with your book. Find out who committed the murder."

"Already know," he said. "Read it before."

She looked at the cover and recognized the title. He must have read the thing a dozen times. But he would have put aside a new one as readily. He was the only person she knew who could take detective stories or leave them alone and who

could go on reading them over and over. She hated them herself. They scared her to death.

"Turkey in?" he asked.

"Not yet. That's what Hendry and Lydia are arguing about now. He's been arguing with the cook, too, but I guess she knows when it ought to go in. I hope so. I don't suppose the boys will get here before six or seven."

She looked at her wristwatch for the hundredth time. Lucas had given it to her. An ironic gift from one who had so little respect for time himself.

"I hope Lucas hasn't decided to go to the game."

"Be along soon," said Mr. Pancoast encouragingly.

"I thought he'd be here before now. I hope he hasn't had an accident with Francy's car."

"Good driver," soothed Mr. Pancoast.

He was a cozy man, as different from her own father as a father could be, but nice to be with and she was very fond of him. Being with him was much like resting on a soft warm pillow.

"New furnace," he called her attention to it with a nod. She turned her head to see and admire.

"It's very impressive," she said, "and it certainly keeps the house warm. You don't know how much I appreciate being warm. Miss Lark, where I board in Midas, believes in cold rooms and long underwear. I haven't been really warm since last September."

He was looking with satisfaction at his furnace.

"Paid for sometime," he said, adding, not too dubiously, "I hope."

He wasn't exactly voluble. He let his wife and the children do most of the talking but there was nothing frustrated or withdrawn about his silences. When he did speak it was usu-

ally in a kind of verbal shorthand. To say much in a house like his it was necessary to shout down others or take advantage of any brief lull by speaking with rapidity, and he didn't like to hurry and the only time he really raised his voice and bellowed like a wounded sea lion was when somebody borrowed one of his tools and failed to return it to its proper hook.

He had a fine array of tools. He seldom used them but he liked having them. Everything that could hang was hung, with an outline of it drawn in red chalk on the whitewashed wall. There was a broad work-shelf at which he seldom worked, and on that stood muffin pans that held various sizes of tacks and nails and screws, nuts and bolts and washers. The only thing on the shelf that didn't belong there was a smallish corrugated-paper carton that said Whole Ripe Figs. Canfield was wedged into it, asleep, with one leg dangling over the side.

"Like teaching?" inquired Mr. Pancoast.

"Yes," she said. "I do, rather. The actual teaching part. I didn't expect to. But I guess I do like it."

He nodded. His nod wasn't like Miss Lark's that went on and on; it was a single bob of the head like a little bow. There was positiveness about it. It carried conviction.

"Thought you would," he said.

She was surprised and pleased. He had thought about it.

"Good at it?" he asked.

Was she?

"Yes. I think I am. At the actual teaching part."

He gave his little positive nod again.

"Thought so. Knew you would be. Told Lyddy so."

He had known she would be good at teaching. Well, she hadn't known it, and he couldn't have, either, but he was a

natural optimist; he was too optimistic to have very sound judgment but it was comforting to have your adequacy believed in even by somebody whose judgment wasn't worth a cent. Why couldn't Lucas have talked to her like this back in September?

But Lucas hadn't wanted her to be good at teaching. He hadn't wanted her to like it. He didn't want her to like doing anything or be successful at anything that kept her away from him.

"What made you think I'd be any good at teaching?" she asked.

"Smart," he said. "Patient. Thorough. Stick to things. Don't fly off the handle."

Flattering. But he had no way of knowing that she was thorough or patient or persevering. She didn't know it herself. Perhaps he thought that because in manner she differed from his children she must possess the qualities they lacked.

"I wasn't an awfully good student," she said. "I had to work hard for what I got. I had to work frightfully hard in college to hang onto my scholarships. I couldn't just cram at the last minute and get by, as Lucas does. But I guess the medium-good students make better teachers, sometimes, than the brilliant ones. I don't mind going over and over and over a lesson with a dumb freshman, because I remember what it used to feel like to be confused and discouraged. Lucas wouldn't be much good at teaching, I think. He's too quick. I've heard him trying to help Hendry with arithmetic and they're at each other's throats in two minutes."

Mr. Pancoast laughed, not out loud because he never did, but the wrinkles around his hazel eyes deepened and he quaked as if with hiccups.

"I guess I'm doing all right," Edwina said without convic-

tion. "The principal hasn't jumped on me so far, and Miss Beatley lets me entirely alone. She's the head of my department. She's been teaching for twenty years and she says all she's got out of it is an undying hatred for the English poets."

Maybe I really am a good teacher, she thought. If I am, then I ought to make a good mother. You have to teach children ever so many things, and you have to be patient with them and clear and thorough. You have to go over and over and over instructions and explanations without getting nervous or losing your temper.

She looked at her watch again. Why didn't he come?

Weeks and weeks since she had seen him. Twice she had heard his voice but it wasn't the same, talking with somebody, when you couldn't see his face.

"You down there, Edwina?" shouted Hendry.

He clattered down the stairs.

"Edwina, how long does a turkey have to cook? I think it ought to start cooking now. It's an awfully big one. I'm hungry. It's a long time since we had breakfast. Mom says we can have sandwiches but I don't want to waste any space. Will you play Chinese checkers with me, Edwina?"

He went to locate the board.

"How do Batty and Fitz like college?" Edwina asked.

"Don't like it," said Mr. Pancoast. "Allergic to books. Leave the minute war's declared."

Her heart gave a terrified plunge.

"But we may not get into the war."

"In it now," he answered placidly. "Same as."

From him, the optimist, it frightened her more than all Scott Collier's raving in the spring.

"You don't really think we'll get into it, Mr. Pancoast?"

"Bound to," he said.

But he didn't know anything about it. He couldn't. And he couldn't possibly sound so matter-of-fact about it if he really believed that Batty and Fitz and Lucas–

"Edweeeeeena!" screamed Lydia down the basement stairs. "Hendreeeee! Where is everybody? Somebody has to zip me up the back. I can't reach."

Edwina ran, glad to escape.

"Thank you, darling," said Lydia. "Look me over. Am I all together?"

She looked wonderful. She looked every day of her age, and her figure was flat in the wrong places and slightly thickened in others so that she was much of a size from neck to knee, and she spent neither time nor thought upon her appearance except to dash into beauty parlors to have her hair waved, which was a fine excuse for finding out all about the love affairs and family problems of the beauty parlor girls. But just before a party she could jump into an old teagown or something and throw on some of the heavy clanking jewelry that she adored, and out of nothing but her exuberant vitality was created an illusion of brilliant beauty. She fooled you. She dazzled you somehow. She did a job on your senses, a kind of Indian rope trick.

"This dress is four years old, darling. I'm not sure it isn't six years old. Some day the thread in the seams is going to dissolve and there I'll be. But I can't bear to throw it away till I have to. Hen likes it and it's so comfortable and you know how black velvet is, it wears down but not out, and you hang it in the bathroom while you have your bath and its good old hackles rise right up. Did Hendry find the carving knife?"

"No, I didn't," said Hendry.

"Well, you'd better!" said Lydia. "You don't expect us to

tear a turkey limb from limb with our naked hands, do you? You've done something with that knife. You must have. You're the only one who ever puts anything away. I only wish you'd put them in the right places, though. Nobody can ever find anything after you've tidied up."

She lifted a finger.

"Be quiet, everybody. I think I heard the front door slam."

She caught up her long skirt.

"They've come!" she said.

Hendry started after her and then came back.

"Aren't you coming, Edwina?"

"Tell Lucas to come out here," she said.

She waited in the back hall by the refrigerator, stricken with shyness that was close to apprehension. She heard his voice and Lydia's competing, drowning out Francy's. If Francy had come. Perhaps she hadn't. Yes, there was her voice.

Lucas came through the kitchen.

"Surprise," Edwina said faintly.

He shut the kitchen door behind him.

"Aren't you surprised?" she asked.

He didn't say a word. He wasn't glad to see her. He simply looked at her. She began to wish she hadn't come. His eyes were too bright, his face too pale and strained. He wasn't glad to see her. He looked the way he had on that Thursday evening. They were back in September, right where they had left off, and they had left off in the midst of a quarrel.

"Your mother and Hendry drove over yesterday and got me. It was a terrible trip for them to make, over and back in one day. They picked me up right after school in the afternoon. We didn't get here until midnight."

"I thought you had made your mind up not to come," he

said, "and I thought when you made your mind up nothing could change it."

She swallowed. She had never felt so selfconscious. His eyes moved over her, down her, slowly, and up again, taking her all in. She was painfully scorchingly conscious of every bit of herself.

"Hell has frozen over," she said. "It's been cold in Midas."

He had stopped loving her. They had been apart too long. They were together at last after weeks and weeks apart, and he didn't want her.

"Say, Lucas!" Hendry burst from the kitchen. "Lucas, were you surprised? I'll bet you were surprised! Say, Lucas, I sent a picture of Edwina to a beauty contest!"

"A beauty contest!" she said. "I thought it was a camera contest."

"It was a beauty contest," he said, "and she didn't even get honorable mention. I'll bet those contests are faked."

Lucas gave a whoop of laughter. He picked her up and kissed her hard, holding her off the floor so that she dangled, but she didn't mind. She didn't mind anything. She didn't even mind Hendry looking at them in disgust and making realistic sounds of nausea. Hendry could do anything on earth he chose to. She was in his debt forever.

9

"My theory about your father-in-law, Francy," said Lydia, "is that he's a werewolf. Haven't you noticed his front teeth? And in spite of all his vegetarian talk, he's a big hearty pink-cheeked man, and she's pale and languid and always wears a high collar and if that isn't to hide the toothmarks I don't know what is."

Francy murmured, "Really?"

Lydia's black eyes rested on her for a fixed moment. Then she turned on her glittering smile.

"No. Not really. But it's a good idea all the same. His booklets were a good idea, too. They made money for him. He's very well off. Of course he inherited quite a lot of money but so did I and where is it? He's kept all his. Not that he's stingy. Far from it. I always go to him when I have to get contributions for my causes. He's very generous and reasonably polite only he makes me go and look at his goats and they smell. Did he make you look at all his creatures, Francy?"

"Yes," said Francy.

"And his printing press?"

"Yes," said Francy.

"And I suppose he gave you copies of his little essays on the horrors of alcohol and tobacco and coffee and meat. That's about all he prints now. He gives me some little souvenir like that whenever I go out. They make wonderful reading aloud at parties. Of course the booklets he used to have done by a regular printer, there was such a demand for them. The blue ones, on obesity, came out just ahead of the thinness-for-women crusade, and they were terribly popular. All my friends were eating raw vegetables and doing Collier jerks, and it was quite some time before Mr. Collier found out how his little blue booklets were being used and why they were selling so well. Helping women to be fashionable was the last thing he wanted to do. He was simply furious when he found out the truth and there was quite a scandal around town, too, because several women were ill from living on lemon juice and egg white and the doctors said it was starvation, and another woman threw her back out doing jerks and had to spend the winter in a plaster cast. And it wasn't Mr. Collier's fault at all. They were perfectly sensible diets and sensible exercises only you know how a lot of women are; more enthusiasm than sense. You can still buy the little red booklets on how to gain weight but who wants to?"

Francy moved restlessly in her chair.

"Lucas. Couldn't we go now?" she asked.

It was the fourth time she had asked him. He had no intention of moving. He was working on a puzzle of links and small celluloid balls, one of Hendry's.

"No hurry," he said.

She could just as well drive out and pay her call without him. She knew the way. But she wouldn't go. Every time he looked up he caught her great eyes fixed on him imploringly.

He had no intention of moving for a while. He was too comfortable and too deeply contented with Edwina beside him on the love seat, her shoulder resting against him. Hendry, at her feet, was talking steadily.

"What does Scott do with himself out there?" asked Lydia.

"He rides," said Francy, "and he's working on his translation of Theocritus. He's putting the Idyls into verse."

"But how dreadful," said Lydia. "Isn't that bad for his nerves? If I were nervous I'd keep away from horses. I can't imagine anything worse for nerves than horses. I don't like them. It's mutual. I don't like reading, either. Perhaps I would if I could find a good habit-forming book. I don't see why Scott didn't go into a hospital. You get such a good rest in a hospital and have such a good time, too, if you're not very sick. But of course you have the best time on the maternity floor and Scott couldn't have got in there unless the other floors were crowded."

Francy gave a little cry and Lucas looked up.

"Why, it's the carving knife!" said Lydia, delighted. "It was down the side of her chair. You never know what you'll find if you run your hands down the sides of chairs in this house. Take it to the kitchen, Hendry. I remember now. We were cutting the cord on the box the slip covers came in. I couldn't find the shears. Do you like the covers, Lucas? They don't fit awfully well but they were a great bargain and Hendry and I lapped them over at the back and fastened them with adhesive tape."

Hendry came back from the kitchen with a large hunk of cake in his hand and Canfield around his neck. Francy stood up on her chair.

"Lucas!" she said. "Lucas, take that cat away!"

She was wild-eyed, her mouth stretched wide with disgust.

She clutched her skirts about her knees. Hendry stared at her.

"Canfield won't hurt you," he said.

"Don't come near me!" she said fiercely. "Don't you dare to! Lucas, take it away."

"I didn't know you were afraid of cats, Fran."

"Well, you know it now! Edwina, take it away!"

Hendry bit off a large mouthful of cake.

"He has as good a right in here as anybody," he said thickly.

"Take him to the basement, darling," said Lydia. "He won't mind."

"He will mind!" said Hendry. He glared at Francy. "What's the matter with you? Sit down. It's silly to be afraid of a cat."

"She can't help it," said Lydia. "It's a phobia. Like me with horses. I'd be upset if you brought a horse in."

He swallowed the last of his cake.

"I wouldn't bring a horse in," he said.

"Basement, Hendry," said his father. "Get going.'

"But he's got to have his Thanksgiving dinner with the rest of us!" shouted Hendry.

"Giblets," said his father. "Ask the cook."

"Got it!" said Lucas. The tangle of links was untangled and made a little chain with a white celluloid ball at either end. He dropped it over Edwina's wrist. "Bracelet for you, Wee Willie. Ball and chain."

"You did it faster than Perkins did," said Hendry.

"Basement, Hendry," said his father.

Hendry pocketed the puzzle and went out with Canfield and Francy stepped down from her chair.

"Please, Lucas, let's go out to the Colliers' now."

"Okay," he said and pulled Edwina to her feet. "Come on."

"There's no need of her going with us," said Francy.

"Yes, there is," he said. "I need her to sit with me and keep me company while you're paying your call."

"But you're coming in with me!"

"No, I'm not."

"Hurry back," said Lydia. "Batty and Fitz and the other boys will be here any time now, and I told the Flocks and the Havens to come early. We'll have sherry or whatever there is."

Hendry came back from the kitchen, without Canfield.

"Are you going out to old man Collier's?" he asked. "Just a minute. I'll be right with you!"

He tore up the stairs.

"Lucas!" said Francy imploringly.

"Don't worry, Fran. He's not going."

They were getting into the car when he came tearing out.

"I'll ride in the rumble seat!"

"No, you won't," said Lucas. "You're not going."

Hendry scowled.

"What do you mean I'm not? I want to get a picture of the old man. I've never seen him. I want to get a good picture of his front teeth."

"See you later," said Lucas.

The car slid away from Hendry.

"If there's anything I dislike more than cats, it's children," said Francy.

"He's really sweet," Edwina said, "if you treat him right."

"You have peculiar taste," Francy answered nastily.

There was very little traffic in the business section of the

city, but the highway, when they turned into it, was busy enough.

"Twelve miles," said Francy, "and then a gas station and a greenhouse and turn right."

"You have a good memory," Lucas said. "You came out only once."

"I'd been married a week," she answered. "You don't think I'd forget anything out of that week, do you?"

At the greenhouse they turned into the quiet road that led to the Collier place. They reached the beginning of the Collier stone wall and came to the iron gate. Francy stepped down. They watched her push open the gate and walk up the path. The old man had never owned a car and didn't encourage visitors, so there was no driveway. Francy's magenta coat was bright between dense masses of evergreens. The path turned and she disappeared. Evergreens hid the low stone house.

"Love me, toad?"

The little dent in the cheek that was next him deepened and he touched it with his finger. She didn't turn her face but she was smiling. The tip of her little nose was red.

"What do you think?"

"I wouldn't know," he said, "the way you act."

She turned her face quickly and he kissed her.

"It's been bad without you, toad."

"Bad for me, too."

"Oh, you!" he scoffed. "You've had a fine time, meeting a lot of people and doing what you liked doing, something new happening all the time in a new place, and I've been stuck in the same old grind, seeing the same people we used to see and going to the same places and you weren't there. And the

worst of it was, I couldn't even remember what you looked like."

"You couldn't remember? Oh, Lucas."

"I never can remember what people look like till I see them again. I don't seem to have any mind's eye."

"You had snapshots."

"Sure," he said. "But what good are pictures? You can look at pictures of dead people over and over but it doesn't bring them alive again."

She put her arms around his neck.

"I've been three-quarters dead, away from you. I'm only now alive again."

"You shouldn't have left me."

"I didn't want to. I had to."

"You didn't have to."

After a moment she said, "I didn't sleep much of any that night. Did you get very drunk?"

"Not very. Just enough."

"What time did you wake up the next day?"

"I don't know. Noon or so. You'd gone."

"You didn't hate me?"

"No," he said. "Not then."

Her arms tightened. Her face was hidden against him.

"Don't ever hate me, Lucas. I can't bear it."

"It never lasts very long."

"I don't hate you," she said, "except just for a minute now and again."

"What minutes?" he asked, startled. "When?"

"I don't want to remember. When does your Christmas vacation start?"

"The Friday before."

"I won't be through until the twenty-fourth. Will you

drive up and get me?"

"Yes," he said and kissed the top of her head.

She tipped her face back and he kissed her mouth. It was a sweet mouth.

"Will you drive very carefully, if it's icy?"

"I'll drive very carefully. I always do."

Christmas was a long way off. If she had married him in September, tonight would have some value for both of them, instead of her sleeping alone in Elise's room while he lay awake in his own room down the hall from her.

"Has it occurred to you, toad, that at Christmas you won't be welcome in Sloppy's room? George will be there. You won't be wanted. You may have to sleep in the corridor and you'll find it drafty."

"It won't be any worse than the room I have at Miss Lark's."

Well, he wouldn't ask her again and be refused again.

They sat in silence. Let her break it. She wouldn't. He said, "I wonder sometimes what you think I'm made of."

She laughed.

"I know what you're made of. Dynamite, and copper wire, and twine, and a lot of elastic."

So it was amusing to her and nothing else.

"If that's so," he said, "the government should dismantle me and use the parts instead of trying to use me as a whole."

She was so still that she seemed to have stopped breathing. It was a long time before she spoke again. He waited.

"Lucas. Do you think you'll have to be in the Army more than a year?"

"God no. I hope not."

"This morning your father said—"

She broke off. Francy came running down the path. She

was laughing. In the fading light her magenta coat and her laughing mouth were intolerably bright.

"She must have done a job on the old man," Lucas said. "I knew she could. She has what it takes."

He leaned across Edwina.

"What's the news, Fran?"

The iron gate clanged behind her.

"Oh, Lucas! Oh, Lucas, he's coming home! He's well!"

She wasn't the same girl who had gone in. She was years younger. Her eyes were enormous, bright and dark, her voice wild with excitement, "He's coming home for Christmas! He's well enough for that! His father has been out to see him! Oh, Lucas, you were right. I don't believe Mr. Collier would have told you anything but he took it for granted that Scott had written me. I plunged right in and said wasn't it splendid news about Scott; I said it to get a rise out of him; I thought even if he didn't tell me anything, his face might give me a hint. And it worked!"

"Don't speak so loud," murmured Edwina. "Voices carry in this quiet."

"He took it for granted I knew. He spoke about Scott being at home for Christmas and he seemed to take it for granted that I'd be here, too. He said I'd have to wear thicker stockings. I buttered him. I said I was trying to put on weight and my cough had disappeared and couldn't he advise me about a diet and he gave me a whole set of his damned little red booklets."

She had them under her arm and she was laughing so that she dropped a couple and stooped to pick them up and dropped another and they all tumbled down around her feet in the mud. She knelt to gather them together and when she stood up with her arms full of crumpled and muddied

pamphlets she said, still laughing, "He's not so horrid as I thought. Just a crank, that's all. But crazy about Scott, so we have that in common. And he's really quite a handsome old man. That's where Scott gets his marvelous looks."

She slid in beside Edwina. As the car moved, she waved a hand to the stone wall and the evergreens and the unseen house.

"Mrs. Collier was in the room but she didn't say one word."

"I don't wonder," said Lucas. "She was probably breathless. She doesn't see anybody like you often, Fran."

She leaned around Edwina to speak to him seriously, "Lucas, I want to apologize to you. Do you remember what I said to you? I said you were completely selfish and that you weren't interested in anything that didn't concern you personally. I daresay it's true but it's true of practically everybody. It's been true of me for months and months. And a thing's being true isn't sufficient reason for saying it. I apologize."

He was surprised and touched.

"I'm so grateful to you for making me come, Lucas. I'll be grateful to you all my life. I wish I could do something wonderful for you, but I don't know what it would be. I'm glad you're marrying into my family. Edwina, I'm glad he fell in love with you and I'm glad you're my cousin."

She caught Edwina's hand and squeezed it.

"You were good to me all summer, both of you. You kept coming to see me and I was hateful to you because I couldn't bear to see people so much in love as you were, and when you stayed with me that week, Edwina, and took such good care of me, as if I were sick, I treated you nastily. I shouldn't have. I should have been grateful to you. Nobody's taken

care of me since I was at home and Dad and Mother were still together. Scott doesn't take care of me. I don't want him to. I want him to be a lover, not a male nurse. But when you're sick in your mind, and alone, it's good to have somebody of your own family to take care of you. Do you realize that I haven't anybody of my own family except you, Edwina, now that Dad's living with that awful woman and Mother's with Aunt Frances and I'll probably never see either of them again and don't want to, under the circumstances?"

Her excited outpouring was beginning to get on his nerves. She sounded as if she were on a jag. Her exhilaration had been contagious just at first but now she was babbling like a fool. Edwina's matter-of-fact cool voice was a relief to his ear, "I'm glad you're to be here at Christmas, Francy. You and Scott both. The four of us must have a party together."

"Will you be here?" asked Francy. "How much time do you have? Two weeks?"

"Ten days, about."

"Are you going to be married then? I should think you would. You're silly to keep postponing it, Edwina. But of course you don't know what you're missing."

"How would she know?" he snapped. What business was it of hers? "When she's ready to find out, I'll be the one to teach her, and we'll be married when she's ready and not before. Whatever suits her is all right with me."

"Well, I must say, you're a cool pair of lovers," said Francy.

Edwina's hand, the one with his ring on it, slipped under his arm and took hold of his sleeve, not enough to interfere with driving but enough to show she was grateful for what he had said.

Francy went on as exuberantly as if he hadn't slapped her face for her, "I found out something else about Scott that will interest you. More than a year ago, when some of the boys around here were going up to Canada and enlisting, some who had been in school with Scott and with you, Lucas, but before Scott was so terribly worked up himself about the war, it seems that his father got him to promise he wouldn't enlist to fight for any country except his own. I think that was very farseeing of Mr. Collier, and perfectly reasonable, because if there's any danger of your own country getting into a war, it's up to you to be on hand when you're needed to defend your own instead of off somewhere defending somebody else. Only Mr. Collier doesn't really believe we'll have to get into this war. He thinks we're being useful enough, just as we are, and nobody will dare to attack us."

Lucas snorted, and Edwina's fingers tightened convulsively on his arm. He wondered what his father had said to her in the morning. Francy chattered on, "You remember last spring how Scott kept saying that civilization was coming to an end and that it was every decent man's duty to fight for it, even if the fight was hopeless, and I lived in terror that he would say he was going to Canada but he never did. Well, it seems he was trying to get his father to release him from his promise, and week before last, when Mr. Collier was out there, Scott tried again, but Mr. Collier wouldn't. It's funny, isn't it, that a promise to his father would have so much weight with Scott? And it isn't as if he respected his father's judgment. He knows he's a silly old crank."

"Who's silly?" asked Lucas. "Didn't I just hear you say he was farsighted and reasonable?"

"Yes, you did, but even a crank can have flashes of wisdom, I suppose."

"Mr. Collier is a smart old man," said Lucas, "and Scott has plenty of respect for him."

"He does not!" said Francy. "He's decent to him only because he doesn't want to hurt the old man's feelings."

"Or because he doesn't want to cut off the source of supply."

"He isn't dependent on his father!" said Francy. "I have enough income for both of us."

"Maybe he'd rather be dependent on his father than on his wife."

They were back at the house. On the front porch, waiting for them, sat Hendry and Canfield, side by side. Francy jumped down and Edwina followed. Hendry and Canfield, side by side, came down the walk. Francy got back into the car and banged the door shut.

"Lucas, I can't get out with that cat on the sidewalk."

"Gosh," said Hendry, "he won't hurt you. He's so well fed he won't even go for rats. He used to be a good ratter, too."

"Don't be silly, Fran."

"I'm not silly," she said. "Make him take it away."

Lucas went around the car. For all he cared she could sit at the curb all day.

"Good old Canfield," said Hendry. "Don't be afraid of him, Mrs. Collier. He's a good old cat."

It was the treacherously amiable voice he had for Justine. He held Canfield up against the window and Francy shrank back. Canfield struggled and clawed at the window. He didn't like cars.

"Pet him, Mrs. Collier. Don't touch his ears, though. They're sensitive. If you touch them, he'll claw you to ribbons."

Lucas shoved him out of the way.

"Lucas," she said piteously, "I shan't spend an easy moment till I'm out of this town. He'll give me no peace. He'll let that cat get at me. I want to go right home anyway. I want to think about Scott and write to him. I don't want to talk and listen to a lot of strangers. You're going to have so many guests, I won't be missed. Please explain to your mother, will you? And please get my hat. It's on the chest in the front hall."

"Don't be a fool, Fran. Canfield never clawed anybody in his life but I'll lock him in the bathroom and swallow the key if that's what you want."

"What I want is to go home," she said. "Please understand. I want to have my Thanksgiving alone where I've lived with my husband. I want to give thanks because he's coming home to me at Christmas. It was nice of your mother to let me come but she wouldn't want me to stay when I don't want to. Please get my hat."

Canfield was digging a small neat hole in the driveway while Hendry stood by, complacent. Lucas ran up the steps and into the hall. A burst of voices came from the living room. Flocks and Havens had arrived. Identifying Francy's hat was easy; a huge flat circle of magenta felt.

"Thanks, Lucas. Thank you for everything. Goodbye. I'll see you both at Christmas."

The engine was running. She leaned to the open window.

"If you should decide to be married Christmas week," she said, "you can have the apartment while we're with Scott's people, if it would be of any use to you. It ought to have glamor for you; you met there; and it's more comfortable than a hotel; more private; and no cats or little brothers to torture you."

The car moved forward. Hendry, watching it go, rubbed the end of his nose with a casual thumb.

"Good boy," he murmured. "Good old Canfield."

Lucas reached for Edwina's hand; it was reaching for his. Her eyes were steady, a little solemn, darkly blue.

"How about it, toad?"

"All right," she said.

"Do you mean that?"

"If you won't tell anyone outside the family. It might cost me my job."

She did mean it. He gripped her hand so tightly that she winced but she didn't try to withdraw it. There was nothing in her look to match his bursting happiness. But there would be. He would make her happy.

"Well," said Hendry, "now we've got rid of her, let's play Chinese checkers till Batty and Fitz come. What do you say?"

10

"A BEEF cube," urged Miss Lark. "It won't take a minute. Winifred has gone up but I know how to boil water. Papa liked a cup of hot bouillon on a cold night after a journey."

It was easier to give in than to think up excuses.

"I'll come out to the kitchen with you," Edwina said.

It was the first time she had been in Miss Lark's kitchen.

She sat at the oilcloth-covered table, too tired to notice much or listen while Miss Lark gave the latest news on the Theriaults and found a saucepan.

The kitchen chair was a little too high. She had to sit forward to keep her feet on the floor. It was necessary to keep her feet on the floor. It was necessary to behave as usual and not break in on what Miss Lark was saying with any fantastic announcement. It wouldn't do to say, "Miss Lark, I'm going to be married at Christmas. Don't tell Mr. Wace. Don't tell anyone. I'm going to be married and keep it a secret till June because we love each other and I refused once before and hurt him and I couldn't do it again."

It certainly wouldn't do to say, "I can manage Christmas when I couldn't have managed September. If I should start a baby at Christmas I could keep it a secret till June and finish

the term. Of course I'll tell him that we must be careful but even when people are careful it sometimes happens."

That wasn't the sort of thing you could speak about to Miss Lark.

The water was boiling. Miss Lark put in the beef cube and stirred. She poured the pale brown liquid into a sprigged teacup and put the saucepan in the sink. The sink was an old-fashioned black one.

"I learned to wash dishes at a sink like that," said Edwina. How tired she was. Thinking about all the dishes she had washed in her time was enough to make her back ache. She hadn't washed any dishes at the Pancoasts'. She hadn't washed any dishes anywhere since the summer. She oughtn't to be so tired.

"Was it a lovely visit?" Miss Lark asked. She set the teacup in front of Edwina and seated herself at the other end of the table.

"Oh yes. A lovely visit."

Except that he had to go back to classes on Friday morning and I didn't see him again until Saturday night and we hadn't a moment alone. Not a single moment.

"The house was simply swarming. Batty and Fitz and their crowd were all over the place. You never heard such a racket. My ears are still ringing. Yesterday the radio was going from breakfast until long after midnight. The boys like it loud. They don't listen to it. They never stop talking while it's on. They howl above it."

Miss Lark shuddered.

"Mrs. Pancoast doesn't mind what happens to her furniture so long as people are enjoying themselves, and her living room is big, so the boys and their crowd congregate there instead of at other houses, especially when they want to

dance. They shove the tables and sofas into the corners and roll back the rugs and bedlam breaks loose. But they have a good time, and Mrs. Pancoast enjoys it. When friends of her own age come to call, she takes them into the dining room."

How tired I am.

"Batty and Fitz were supposed to go back to the university on Friday but they couldn't be bothered. I think they want to flunk out. Their father has spent a lot of money on tuition and board and books this fall but they haven't any conscience pangs about that. They could earn part of their tuition; it wouldn't hurt them; but Mr. Pancoast wants them to have a good time, and he says if they find out what they want to do by the time they're through college, then the money will have been well invested. But he says if we get into the war, the boys will join up instantly. I don't believe he'd try to stop them, either, though they're only eighteen and nineteen."

If he hadn't scared me by what he said about our getting into the war, I wouldn't have agreed to marry Lucas at Christmas. I scare too easily.

But maybe I would have agreed anyway. I couldn't refuse again, and hurt him. I couldn't, after he stood up for me against Francy. I never thought he would stand up for me like that. Against himself, too.

I ought to be happier. I ought to be, since he is. I will be when I get over being so tired.

"Thank you for the bouillon, Miss Lark. It was just what I needed."

In her icy bedroom she sat at the desk and looked at her calendar and her savings account book and figured ways and means and a budget from Christmas to June and what she could spend on a new dress. She wanted a new dress to be

married in. Something with no suggestion of the schoolroom about it.

She had thought of a summer wedding at Lydia's. She had always thought of their being married at the end of June or early in July. She had thought of a white organdy dress. You couldn't wear organdy at Christmas. It was silly to care about such trifles. Getting married was the thing to care about.

If he was happy, and satisfied with her, that was what mattered. He was wonderfully sweet when he got his own way. He had been sweet about agreeing to tell the family nothing until the last minute. Lydia was expecting them home for Christmas but she wouldn't mind a phone call at the last minute explaining their change of plans. She hadn't seemed to mind when Elise married that way.

The catch was that Lydia would want to tell everybody. It was hateful, having to keep a marriage secret. It was going to be hateful coming back to Midas and pretending to be Miss Voorhis for six months.

Well, you couldn't have everything just as you wanted it when there were two of you concerned, and it took two to make a marriage.

When her November pay check came in, she paid her December board in advance and went shopping for Christmas cards and a new dress. She tried on the dress to show Miss Lark. She wanted to show someone.

"My dear, you look beautiful," said Miss Lark. "I have to say so although Mamma impressed on me when I was little that 'praise to the face is open disgrace.' It's a splendid piece of material and such an attractive color; just the color of your hair."

"You really like it?" Edwina asked. "I want to look par-

ticularly nice at Christmas if I can. It's a special day."

She would have liked to tell Miss Lark. She wanted to tell someone. But it wouldn't be safe to tell anyone in Midas.

I wish we could have waited till school was out, she thought. I wish. I wish.

The first week of December was mild. Or else I'm getting accustomed to the cold, she thought. Or maybe I'm too much excited inside to feel the cold.

"It doesn't seem possible," said Miss Lark, "that Christmas is so close. No real snow yet. Just that one flurry that melted before it touched the sidewalk. I do hope we won't have a green Christmas. It always means sickness."

Everybody at school was coughing and sneezing. Miss Beatley had laryngitis and couldn't speak above a whisper, but the whisper held all her usual bitterness, concentrated. Mr. Wace was out three days with bronchitis. The chemistry teacher barked in everyone's face and said he got rid of a cold by not giving in to it. Miss Oakes, between classes, used nose drops. She recommended them to Edwina. She always knew best about everything.

"But I never have colds," said Edwina. "I'm immune."

I have to be, she thought. I couldn't be married with a red nose and streaming eyes. And I'm going to be married. So I can't have a cold.

Lucas wrote that he had phoned his mother about their Christmas plans and she was enthusiastic. She wanted them to come home for New Year's if they felt like it.

Edwina addressed her Christmas cards on Sunday afternoon. It was too early to mail any except the Martineaus' but she had to keep busy. She wanted everything ready in plenty of time and she wanted to keep busy. There would be two more Sundays after this, and then Christmas.

When the cards were finished, she brought her suitcase out and put in a few things, handkerchiefs, a new pair of stockings, her suède pumps, a plaid skirt, the ivory satin nightgown with the lace top which she had never worn, a present from Francy.

She wrapped and addressed the presents for the family. She had a book of magic for Hendry. If he took up magic in a big way, and he might, it would mean less photography. That ghastly album. Well, after she was married she could say the album belonged to Lucas, not to her. There was some excuse for having a book of snapshots of somebody else, someone you cared about. But it was embarrassing to have a whole album of nobody but yourself. Unless your name was Narcissa.

Oh, I'm ungrateful, she scolded herself.

Hendry loved her. The album was proof of it. He had wanted to make her something because last Christmas she had knitted him a scarf, a dull enough present, but he had worn it constantly even when the weather turned warm in May.

There was a tap on the door.

"Come in," she said.

Miss Lark came in. Her head was shaking madly.

"Oh, Miss Voorhis," she said. She panted. She never panted. She must have run up the stairs.

"Mrs. Theriault just called up," she panted. "Oh, it's bad news. It's bad news."

Mrs. Theriault had telephoned on that icy afternoon when the bus had skidded and overturned near Midas Junction. Lucas had telephoned later and wanted to drive up.

"I'm thankful Papa isn't alive to know about this," panted Miss Lark. "He would be so angry. He never liked the Japanese. And he wouldn't have a radio in the house. That's why

I've never bought one. Mrs. Theriault called up because she knew we didn't have a radio. She was terribly excited. I couldn't understand all she said. I never knew much about geography anyway but you're a teacher, you must know, Miss Voorhis. Where is Pearl Harbor?"

If I could just see him for one minute, Edwina thought. If I could just take hold of him and hold onto him for one minute. If I could ask him what he's going to do and what he wants me to do.

There isn't anything for me to do but wait until he phones. There isn't anything for women, now, except to wait and keep still and not make a fuss and then do what men tell them to do. He'll telephone when he can.

It's entirely a man's world now. I mustn't try to call him. It would be silly for me to go to him. I'd only be in his way. I'd be a nuisance.

She sat downstairs with Miss Lark, waiting for him to call.

"They'll all be in it now. Lucas and Batty and Fitz. All of them, Miss Lark. How does a woman bear it when she has three sons all the right age for war? I'm glad Hendry's too young. And there's George Ryan, too. He's the right age. He's Elise's husband. How does a girl bear it when she's been married two months and her husband goes to war?"

Miss Lark couldn't tell her. Miss Lark had never been married. Miss Lark hadn't any sons.

When Edwina went upstairs to bed, there was her suitcase, open on a chair, with a few things lying in it, ready to be packed. The Christmas packages were on the bureau. The little stack of Christmas cards, addressed and sealed and stamped, lay on the desk. She couldn't send them now. They all said "Peace on earth."

The sun came up and it was Monday, a school day. If Lucas telephoned, Miss Lark would have to take the message.

The morning was surprisingly like any school morning. Bells rang and classes met. The students were sober-faced and fairly quiet. They behaved well, better than some of the faculty. Just before noon, in Medieval History, Miss Oakes had hysterics and her shrieking and laughing could be heard all over the building. After school there was a teachers' meeting to plan air raid drills and Miss Beatley, still hoarse with laryngitis, whispered that nobody would waste a bomb on Midas.

Lucas didn't phone.

On Tuesday afternoon when Edwina reached home she found Miss Lark taping the parlor windows. The white criss-cross strips were as shocking as the black letters of the evening headlines.

"Mrs. Theriault says we must get ready to take in children from the coast," said Miss Lark, "and I've counted the blankets. I don't know what Papa would think, the house full of children. He would want me to do what I could, though. Winifred won't like it. I don't believe the war is quite real to her, she's so old and so deaf. I tried to talk to her about it and all she said was that if I wanted Indian pudding tonight I must order corn meal because we were out."

Why didn't he send some word? Where was he?

He phoned on Thursday evening.

"Are you all right, toad? We had a bomb scare. I don't suppose it reached you, you're so far inland."

"We had it. Oh, Lucas, what are you planning to do?"

"I've already done it. Batty and Fitz and I are in the Navy. What do you think of that?"

The Navy. She had been thinking Army all along. The Navy. It was only a word to her, remote, mysterious, impressive, terrifying. Army was remote enough but not quite so strange because many of his friends were in the Army.

"I joined the Reserve," he said, "so I won't start training yet. I figured I was so close to a degree I might as well try for a commission."

Safe for a few months. She breathed again.

"Our schedule's going to be speeded up to let us graduate early. No vacations from New Year's on. I'll have to dig in and work. I'll have to work most of the Christmas vacation but you won't mind too much, will you? It can't be helped."

That settled Christmas. It settled marriage. It was his way of saying there wouldn't be any marriage. Love had to take second place when there was a war for men to think about.

He sounded cheerful, as if hard work and getting a degree had some point at last.

"I won't be able to drive up and get you, toad. But you can get yourself down by train, can't you?"

"You mean you still want me?" she cried. "You want us to be married just the same?"

"Hell's fire!" he said. "Want you? You little dope!"

He phoned again the next week, Wednesday.

"What do you think I just heard from Lydia? Scott's father had a stroke the day war was declared. Nobody knew about it because Mrs. Collier was afraid to call in a doctor. The old man didn't believe in doctors. He died Monday. The funeral's today. Lydia had to arrange it. Mrs. Collier's in a fog. She hadn't even wired Scott that his father was ill. Pop had to do it and Scott wired back that he couldn't come on for the funeral."

"He couldn't come!" exclaimed Edwina. "Why? Is he worse again?"

"He didn't say. So Fran's gone to him. I'm at her apartment now. I just put her on the train. She doesn't know when she'll be back and she said make ourselves at home, so I have. When can you get here, darling?"

"Not till Christmas morning."

"Well, that's as good a day to be married as any I can think of. There's no Christmas present I'd rather have."

"Miss Beatley is driving to the Junction on Christmas Eve to catch the sleeper and she'll take me with her so I'll be with you at seven-forty on Christmas morning if nothing happens."

"Nothing had better happen!"

"Well, a heavy snowstorm," she said. "We haven't had any snow yet and it may all come at once when it does come. But if I can't get the sleeper I'll telephone you."

"I'll be here at the apartment most of the time after tomorrow. Friday I have a class in the morning and two in the afternoon and then I'll be working here all the time. It's quieter than the dorm. If I get a lot done between now and Christmas we may be able to go home for New Year's. But we won't see much of Lydia if we do. She spends her nights watching for planes and her days organizing home defense. That's how she happened to find out about Scott's old man. If Pop can sell the house and get into the Army, she's going to get herself a job. She'll have to. She thinks she can and I wouldn't put it past her. Goodnight, darling. I love you."

Edwina lay awake all night. Too much was happening too fast. Nothing was real any more. I must keep my job, she thought. I must hold onto that. I have nobody but myself to fall back on.

She had never wanted to have to fall back on Lucas' father,

but even when she hadn't realized it the Pancoast home had been there in her mind as a kind of haven. A kind of security.

There wasn't any security anywhere. There couldn't be, in war. Perhaps there wasn't any, in peacetime or any time, except in yourself.

What a good thing that I'm healthy, she thought. That I take after Father's mother instead of my own. My body is strong even if my mind isn't. My mind will have to learn to be strong. I must learn how not to be afraid. I must learn to do what I have to do from minute to minute without looking ahead because looking ahead is terrifying and fear is crippling. I've always looked ahead too much. I've been able to endure the present by looking forward to something lovely in the future. But after New Year's there will be nothing ahead that will bear thinking about. I must work so hard day by day that at night I can sleep. What a good thing that I have work to do. If I lose my job, I can get another because I must. If I can't teach, I can cook and wash dishes and scrub floors.

On Saturday she mailed the Christmas cards and the presents. Other people were mailing cards and packages as usual. The thing to do was to behave as usual. You couldn't, but you could pretend to.

Making black-out curtains wasn't usual but it was something useful to do and it took up time. She sewed with Miss Lark all afternoon and evening. She slept in snatches through an endless night and was dizzy when she went down to breakfast on Sunday morning. Eye-strain, probably. Or perhaps she was light-headed because she was going to be married. If nothing happened. And nothing must be allowed to happen. Bad weather mustn't be allowed to cut off a single hour or day of the little time she would have with Lucas.

"Don't you think you should wrap up your throat, my dear?" asked Miss Lark when they started for church.

"Why, it's warm," said Edwina. "It's wonderfully mild."

Or perhaps it wasn't. She could see her breath. But she couldn't feel the cold.

The Theriaults came to dinner. She excused herself immediately after dessert.

"I must finish packing," she said.

If she could lie down and sleep, the vertigo would disappear. If a little sewing could do this to her, she must need glasses.

In her bedroom she doubled up with a sharp attack of cramps. Nervous indigestion. That was all it was. Excitement had gone to her stomach. Humiliating and ridiculous.

There was nothing ridiculous about the attacks of pain but they didn't last long and in between she slept heavily. In the evening she felt better and went down to supper and drank two cups of hot strong tea and went upstairs again in a hurry and lost the tea.

At breakfast Miss Lark was concerned.

"You don't look right, my dear. I wonder if you ought to go to school? You may be starting one of these feverish colds."

Edwina shook her head. That was a mistake. The room whirled.

"It isn't a cold, Miss Lark. I always start a cold with a sore throat. Some day when I can afford it I shall have my tonsils out. I haven't a sore throat today."

The room blurred and darkened. Miss Lark's voice blurred as it never did. She was saying something about Christmas. Edwina sat very still. The vertigo passed.

"Mrs. Theriault," said Miss Lark, "is afraid there may be a

token bombing on Christmas Eve or Christmas night."

"If there is," began Edwina, and stopped herself. She had almost said, If there is, I want to be with Lucas.

She pushed back her chair and suddenly was on her knees.

"Oh, my dear, did you hurt yourself?" Miss Lark tugged at her arm, trying to help her up. "That slippery floor. Winifred waxed it yesterday."

"I'm not hurt," said Edwina.

But I must get to the bathroom.

She fainted again just outside the bathroom door but Miss Lark wasn't there to see her.

She went to school. She had to go to school. She had two attacks of pain in the morning but managed to keep from disgracing herself in public. She crawled home at noon and fainted in the front hall.

"It isn't anything," she protested weakly when Miss Lark wanted to call a doctor. "It's a stomach upset. I'm ashamed of myself. I'll stay in bed this afternoon, if you'll telephone the school, and by tomorrow I'll be fine. I swear I will."

She spent the night running to the bathroom. In the morning Miss Lark sent for the doctor.

She couldn't go. She had to go. Lucas wanted her with him and she wanted to be with him. No, she didn't. All she wanted was to lie flat and give herself up to being thoroughly sick. But she couldn't. It was Tuesday morning and on Wednesday night she was driving to the Junction to catch the sleeper and the doctor said if she did she would get pneumonia and have to go straight into a hospital.

She couldn't afford a hospital.

You couldn't spend a honeymoon in an oxygen tent.

But she had to go if she crawled on her hands and knees.

Because after Christmas week he wouldn't have any vacations for a honeymoon.

It wouldn't be a vacation anyway because he had his books and things at the apartment and would have to study all the time. She would only be a nuisance to him if she were sick. If he had to think about her being sick, he couldn't work.

She pushed back the smothering quilt. She was burning up. Francy said she was cold-blooded and it wasn't true.

She would have to call him up and say she couldn't come because she had summer complaint in the middle of winter. It was intestinal flu; it acted like food poisoning; the doctor said it was all over town.

Perhaps by Wednesday night she would be well again.

She had to go. She had put off marriage too long and now there was a war, and she wanted to marry him before he went away. He had wanted her to marry him in September and she had refused and now she wanted to marry him and her stomach was full of cramps or perhaps she had fur balls. Canfield threw up when he had fur balls.

When she woke up Miss Lark was standing by the bed with a glass.

"It's lukewarm water and paregoric."

Edwina drank it.

"I'll send a wire to your friends, my dear."

"Oh no. I'll be better by tomorrow. This still is Tuesday, isn't it? What time is it?"

"A little past two. Do you feel any better?"

"Yes, thank you."

She felt much worse.

"I have to go out for a little while," said Miss Lark. "Will you be all right, do you think? Winifred can't hear you if you call but she'll be here. Perhaps you can sleep."

"Yes. I'll sleep," said Edwina.

After I've telephoned.

If I can keep down the paregoric, I won't telephone.

"Winifred will come in at intervals to see if you need anything," said Miss Lark. "You mustn't on any account get out of bed. You mustn't get chilled, the doctor said."

If I can just keep this down until you're out of the house.

I wonder if pregnancy is any worse than this.

The paregoric and lukewarm water came up.

I can't go, she thought in despair. I can't go. Lucas wouldn't want me around when I'm like this. He hates being with sick people. I hate being with myself.

Her legs were shaky. Getting into her bathrobe was a laborious business that left her forehead damp with sweat and her mind swimming. She looked down the stairs and was afraid of falling. She sat and eased herself down a step at a time. The telephone was within reach. Why had telephoning seemed so important? A wire would have done as well. Nothing was important but to get back to bed, to lie flat, to lie still.

She put through the call and waited, her forehead against her hand. After a long time Lucas shouted, "Hello! Is that you, toad?"

He shouted, but the shout was small and far off.

"Lucas, I can't make the journey. I came down with flu on Sunday. The doctor says I must stay in bed a week and perhaps longer."

There was a silence.

His little far-off voice said, "That's too bad."

He didn't sound like himself.

"How bad is it?" he asked.

"Uncomfortable."

"I'm sorry."

"I'm sorry, too."

"Are you?"

Her mind was getting dark and foggy. She must get back to bed.

"I'll come up and spend Christmas with you. Shall I?"

Here? In this house? Driving Miss Lark and Winifred crazy? Having a horrid time himself?

"Oh no. I'm not that sick. I mean I'm too sick. I'm no good to anyone. I just sleep all the time. Go home and have a decent Christmas."

She added feebly, "Give them my love."

"Edwina!" he said sharply. "If you're seriously ill I'm coming to you."

"But it isn't serious. Don't come. I'd rather you didn't."

"You don't want me to come to you?"

The cramps were back again. Faintness blinded her.

"Edwina! Answer me! Don't you want me to come?"

If she were dying, he would stand and argue.

"No, I don't."

The blindness passed, and she saw the receiver dangling, swinging to and fro. It had slipped from her fingers when she didn't know it. She had slipped to the floor somehow. After a while she struggled up and put the receiver on its hook. She must get back to bed before Miss Lark came home. She must. She must. But how could she ever climb all those stairs? She couldn't.

She sat on the lowest stair and cried from weakness and despair.

11

He went back to the dining room where the table was littered with papers and books and cigarette ashes. He sat down and picked up a pencil and dropped it again. At his elbow was the coffee pot, stone cold. Not quite empty. He poured half a cupful. The coffee was very bitter.

She had said her say and hung up on him. Or had she? He hadn't heard any click of a replaced receiver. The line might have gone dead. But if it had, why hadn't she called back? Perhaps she would, presently.

No, she wouldn't. She had said her say. She wouldn't call up again just to say she was sorry, because she wasn't sorry. She hadn't ever wanted to marry before June. She hated to change a plan. Not even a war could make her change. She had given him a promise at Thanksgiving but she hadn't been happy about it.

He put his head down on his folded arms.

She had never meant to come to him at Christmas. Illness was a good enough excuse if you were too far away to check up. First she said she wasn't very sick and then she said she was, and she didn't want him with her. She had made that clear.

A good excuse. Perhaps when June came she would think up another good excuse for putting him off. She wouldn't want to marry until the war was over. She wouldn't want to give up her Midas job. They didn't hire married women. She didn't care how long she kept him waiting. But if she didn't want to marry him, why keep him dangling?

I've had about enough, he thought. Just about enough. If she calls again by tomorrow afternoon, okay. If she doesn't, okay and I'm through. Let her find some other fool to hang around her. Hanging is what a fool deserves.

He worked steadily until daylight came in at the windows. He made fresh coffee to clear his head. But his head didn't clear. His mind clogged. He stumbled into the living room. He would lie down for half an hour's nap and then work through the day and another night and on Christmas morning he would get drunk enough to sleep through Christmas night and he wouldn't know or care what night it was. She hadn't telephoned again. She wouldn't. She had never meant to come.

He opened his eyes and the room was dark and she was there. She had come after all. She was in the room. The lights went on.

"I'd forgotten you'd be here," Francy said.

Francy.

"Hello," he said. "What day is this?"

"It's nearly Christmas Eve."

"It can't be."

"It is."

He had slept all day. He would have heard the phone if it had rung. He had been a fool to think it might ring again.

His head was perfectly clear. His skull felt empty.

"I didn't expect you back, Fran."

"I didn't expect to come back," she said.

"Well, don't just stand there, for God's sake. Take off your hat and shawl and sit down."

As if she had been waiting for his bidding, she moved to the nearest chair and sank into it. She put a hand up to her hat and pushed at it and dropped her hand again. The hat was the one she had worn on Thanksgiving Day, the big flat circle of bright magenta felt. She had the magenta coat on, too. He remembered how she had come running down the path from the Colliers' house, hatless, with that bright coat flying open and her face lighted up and her mouth bright and laughing.

He stared at her. Her eyes were stretched wide but they weren't looking at him. There was a glazed fixedness about them and a stiffness about the way she sat that was like Elise when she walked in her sleep.

You were supposed to be gentle with sleep-walkers. It was bad for them to be roused too suddenly.

He would clear out presently. The mantel clock said six. He wondered idly why she had come back. She had expected to stay on with Scott. Through Christmas, anyway.

The windows were black. Christmas Eve. The phone hadn't rung again.

The cigarette box at his elbow was empty.

"Have you any, Fran? I'm all out."

"In my bag. It's somewhere. The hall, I guess."

He found it. It was a big black envelope with petit point flowers in cerise and blue. He remembered her scrabbling around in it to find money for her ticket a week ago. She had been so much excited that she couldn't find her money. He had had to take the bag out of her hands and find the bills and pay for the ticket. He had put her on the train.

He had been excited, too. Not on her account.

A gust of rage shook him and his face burned and suddenly the rage was gone and his head was clear and empty again.

Christmas Eve. He had looked forward to Christmas morning.

She had never meant to marry him on Christmas.

Okay, he thought. That's the end of that. If that's how she wants it, it's all right with me. I've had enough. I'm through. Through!

"Cigarette, Fran?"

"No," she said.

She didn't often refuse.

"What's the idea?"

She didn't answer.

"How did you find Scott? Was he in good shape?"

Her lips parted and closed again and parted as if she wanted to speak and couldn't. Her mouth looked smaller than usual, differently shaped, softer. No lipstick. He had never seen it without lipstick. Her face looked different, smaller, dominated by her dark staring eyes instead of by her mouth.

"You saw him, didn't you, Fran?"

"Yes, I saw him," her voice was light and high without inflection. She turned her head a little stiffly as if afraid that her neck would snap in two if she jerked it. It was a very slender neck to bear up the weight of her head with so wide a hat. She glanced around the room vaguely, frowning a little. Her eyebrows were very thin, pale brown, not quite alike. One lifted slightly at its outer corner.

"He sent me back," she said.

"Is he going to join the Army right away?"

"I don't know. I didn't ask him."

She hadn't asked him. She didn't know. What sense there had been, momentarily, fell apart.

He started to ask a question and checked himself. He didn't know why it was important to treat her gently but it was. She wasn't the same girl he had put on the train a week ago, who had flung her arms around his neck in wild exuberance and kissed him goodbye, crying, "Lucas, I'm so happy! I'm so grateful to you! Thank you for everything!" hysterical with happiness. She had kissed him a second time and said, "That's for Edwina. Give her my love."

Edwina didn't want love. Not if anything was expected in return.

"Lucas, what is it that grinds exceeding small? All the way in the train, with the wheels grinding and grinding, I've been trying to think what it was. What is it that grinds slowly but grinds exceeding small?"

Like a riddle. Ridiculously, he thought of Hendry at Thanksgiving, going around asking everybody, "Do you know what the man said to the bathtub?"

"Mills," said Lucas.

"Mills?" she repeated. "What mills, Lucas? The mills of death? The mills of life? The mills of grief?"

"The mills of God."

"God?" she said. "God had nothing to do with it. It was that dreadful old man. Scott's father. He brought Scott up to be different from other people. Scott ought to have hated him. I thought he did. You said he didn't. You were right. You've known Scott a lot longer than I have. You were right about him. He didn't hate his father. He loved him. He loved his father better than anyone. I guess he never loved anyone except his father. And his father's dead."

She put her hand up to her forehead again and pushed her

hat back so that it rested on the top of her head. The brown curls on top of her forehead were a damp tangle. He had never seen her with her hair disarranged or wearing a hat at a ridiculous angle. She looked bewildered and heartbroken like a child unjustly and brutally punished.

"I'll never ride in a train again," she said. "I'll drive. I don't like driving. The lights come up and hit me in the face and I'm terribly afraid of being run into and killed or maimed. I don't want to die, especially not that way. No matter how awful being alive is, I don't want to die. But I'd rather drive than go by train. It's quieter. I couldn't get a berth and I sat up all night in the coach and the wheels made the most hideous grinding. They got inside my head. They ground me slowly but exceeding small."

She stood up, swaying slightly.

"I'll just pack a few things and then I'll go. That's what I came back for. To get some summer clothes. I'll need summer clothes in Florida, won't I, even at Christmas? And the car keys. They're somewhere. I won't take long."

He stood in her path and took hold of her, gently, by her upper arms. She was sleep-walking or fatigue-drunk.

"Where do you think you're going to, Fran?"

"Florida," she said. "I told you. I'll just pack a bag and then I'll get out of here. I won't be in your way tomorrow. You're getting married tomorrow."

"No, I'm not."

How easy it was to say it. He could say it with no sense of grief or loss. He hadn't lost anything. You couldn't lose what you'd never had.

"Yes, you are," said Francy, docile under his hands, and not arguing, just saying words in that light sweet uninflected voice. "You're taking quite a risk, I think, getting married on

Christmas, because what if your marriage went to pieces? You'd hate Christmas forever after, and it ought to be the nicest day of the year."

The sofa was nearer than the chair. He moved her toward it and made her sit. She seemed to have no will of her own.

"I've always had wonderful Christmases," she said. "Last year was wonderful because I was here with Scott. I didn't even mind much about Daddy and Mother because I had Scott. I must have been very stupid and self-centered, Lucas, never to have realized that Mother and Daddy disliked each other and only stayed together because of me. They waited till I was married before they separated. Why would they have done that, Lucas? They must have loved me. I don't understand how you could love a child if you disliked the person who had given it to you. I couldn't love a child, anyway. I don't like children. I only wanted one to please Scott. I'm thankful now that I didn't have one."

She reached out and clutched his hand. He put his other hand over hers.

"You've been good to me, Lucas. I mustn't stay around and spoil tomorrow for you. You're being married tomorrow."

"No, I'm not, Fran. It's all off. It's completely off."

"You're not going to marry Edwina tomorrow?"

"I'm not going to marry her tomorrow or any other time."

She accepted it without surprise. He was grateful for that.

"I'm sorry, Lucas."

"You don't have to be sorry, Fran."

"You don't mind much?"

"I don't mind at all."

If that wasn't true, it would be.

"You did love her, didn't you? But now you don't. Is it hard to fall out of love?"

"No. Quite easy, Fran."

"That's good," she said. "I have to learn how. I think I'm beginning to already. I was ground so small in the train, coming back, that there isn't much room left in me for love or hate or regret or anything. You can't go on loving forever if you aren't loved in return, can you?"

"No," he said. "You can go on for quite a while, just so long as you can fool yourself, but then something snaps and you're free."

You hang up a receiver or slam a door and you're free. Why, that was wonderful. No loyalty binding you. No anxiety gnawing at you.

There shouldn't be anxiety with love. He had never known anxiety in love until this winter.

"Freedom for a Christmas present," said Francy. "Mother and Daddy always gave me the loveliest presents, things I hadn't a hope of getting until I was older. There was only one thing I wanted this Christmas and I hoped to have it; I counted on it; in spite of sickness and death and war, this Christmas was going to be happy for me; the happiest I'd ever known. In spite of Scott's father dying and Scott being upset by that and sick again, as I thought he must be when he didn't come east for the funeral, in spite of the war and his being sure to enlist as soon as he was well enough, I was going to be happy. Just being with him on Christmas was all I wanted. You never get what you expect at Christmas after you're grown up, do you? I expected happiness and Scott's given me freedom instead."

It was her left hand that he had in both of his. He looked down at it and saw that it was ringless.

"I threw my wedding ring out of the train window," she said. "I waited until we reached the Divide where the rivers

flow two separate ways, never to meet. That was a good gesture, wasn't it? Better than throwing myself out, I thought. Some women kill themselves when their hearts are broken, but how silly that is. Because you can fall out of love and it doesn't do you nearly so much damage as falling out of a train window. Daddy fell out of love with Mother years ago and now he's in love again; the woman is dreadful; she dyes her hair jonquil yellow; she used to live near us and I've seen her often at home and I never could bear her; but he seems to be happy with her. And Mother's quite happy living with Aunt Frances and both of them despising men. And you're out of love but you seem to be quite serene about it. So I'm going to be serene about it, too. I'll pack some thin dresses and big hats and drive to Florida for a divorce. Florida is the place to go in the cold months, isn't it?"

He had never known her when she wasn't in love with Scott. He had never thought of her apart from Scott. It made her seem a different Francy.

"I'll be Frances Voorhis again," she said, "and never try to see him again and never press myself against him and put my arms around him and try to make him want me. He never loved me. He told me so, Lucas. He liked sleeping with me, but anyone he picked up on the street, who was healthy, would have done as well, only he was afraid to pick up just anyone, because she might not have been healthy, and that's why he married me. He was jittery and not sleeping well and having the dreams you usually have at fourteen and he saw a doctor who said what he needed was to get married. So he married me. For his health."

Lucas said, "I don't believe that, Fran," appalled.

"But he told me so, Lucas! Not when he married me. Oh no. He saved that information to give me as a Christmas pres-

ent this year. I went out to see him and he let me stay one night with him and then he told me he had learned to get on without me and that I'd better get a divorce, that his health was better, that he didn't need me and he didn't love me and we had no child. And without love or children, a marriage shouldn't continue. Do you see, Lucas?"

"He did love you, Fran."

Then he remembered something. He had seen them together, often, in this room. He had thought of them as happily married, deeply in love. But he remembered that it was always Francy who reached for Scott's hand or came up to him suddenly and kissed his cheek or sat on the arm of his chair and wound her arm around his neck. Always Francy who made the little eager spontaneous signs of love. Never Scott. Scott had accepted.

But how could a man help responding to and being grateful for warmth and sweetness freely given?

"He never loved me. I thought he did. I wanted to believe it. He didn't love me but he was ready to marry because the doctor had advised him to and his father had said it was all right for a man to marry when he was ready to have children. If I had let him alone, he might have found some broad-faced broad-hipped hearty girl his father approved of. But I didn't let him alone. You know how I ran after him. You were at summer school with us. You must have seen how I wound myself around his neck and held on. I was mad about him. I did my best to excite him. It wasn't hard. He'd never gone with girls. He'd never kissed one. I knew a lot more about love-making than he did. All he knew was what he'd read about."

She put a hand up and pushed at her hat.

"Take it off, for God's sake," said Lucas.

He tried to lift it off but a band of elastic went under her curls in the back. He had to slip the elastic down and under, holding her hair bunched together with his other hand. He sent the cartwheel spinning across the room, but the silky feeling of her hair clung to his fingers.

She pushed back the curls on her forehead. Just below the hairline was a deep red mark, all the way across, that the hat had made.

"You're a fool to wear a tight hat, Fran!"

"It isn't tight," she said. "I've had it on for days and nights, that's all. I never thought to take it off. My head would have hurt just the same, anyway. It was the wheels of the train, grinding, that hurt my head. I'm ground exceeding small, Lucas. I've lost the confidence in myself that I used to have. I always knew I wasn't beautiful but I didn't care at all because I figured I had everything else that a man could want. A lot of men have made love to me, Lucas, and some have wanted to marry me, but Scott was the one I couldn't live without. I knew when I married him that I loved him more than he loved me, but I knew how to excite him and make him want me and I thought once he had married me and slept with me he would love me very much. I was sure of myself, wasn't I?"

"You had reason to be."

"No," she said, and her eyes filled but no tears fell. "No. He's lived away from me for months. He's learned to live without me. He expects to be killed in this war and he wants to be. His father is dead. He can't ever, anywhere, have the kind of happiness he had as a child, living with his father, and he doesn't want any other kind of happiness. He's through with me. He's through with the books that he loved. He took

a few of them with him in May, and he's burned them, Lucas. He shouldn't have done that. I don't see how he could, when the burning of the books in Europe horrified him."

"Fran, don't talk about him any more. Don't think about him."

"All right," she answered obediently. "I won't."

All right. All right. It was an expression that everyone used. It was as universal as Goodbye or I love you. But he heard Edwina saying it. He was on the sidewalk with her in front of his house, and Hendry and Canfield were just behind them, and when he said, "How about it, toad?" she answered, unhesitatingly, "All right." He wasn't likely to forget that, ever. He had to forget it. She hadn't really meant it. She had said it to satisfy him and keep things peaceful at Thanksgiving. Then when she was miles away, she could find a plausible excuse for getting out of her promise. She could telephone and say she was ill. Too ill to come to him at Christmas but not ill enough for him to go to her. Illness was always a plausible excuse for getting out of anything, except when the illness came at too pat a moment; then it wasn't so plausible.

Scott's illness in the spring had been real enough. It hadn't been just an excuse for getting away from Francy. There had been plenty of things to get away from; newspapers, and the radio, incessant talking and thinking about the war; his sense of duty about the war, and the promise to his father.

"I must pack," said Francy. "I must find the car keys."

She went over and picked up her big black purse with the petit point flowers and emptied the contents of it on the table.

"You aren't going to start out tonight!" he said.

"Yes, I am. I must. I can't spend Christmas here."

"You're worn out. You can't see straight. You'll have an accident."

"Then come with me. You drive," she said. "You drive till you get tired and then I'll stop somewhere and you can come back by train."

It was a good idea. It was a way to spend Christmas Eve and Christmas.

"Will you, Lucas?"

"Yes," he said. He liked driving at night. He never thought about accidents. He liked the darkness of night, when he wasn't alone in it.

"Lucas, I haven't enough money. Have you any?"

He went through his pockets.

"You won't get far on that, my poor girl. Never mind. The banks will be open on Friday."

"I can't wait that long!"

"You'll damn well have to, Fran."

She put her hands over her face and her body shook and he couldn't tell whether she was laughing or coughing or sobbing. What did you do about hysterics?

Hysterics was shrieking. She wasn't making a sound.

"Fran, stop it. You're tearing yourself to pieces. Stop it!"

If it was coughing, she probably couldn't. Was she sobbing?

He put his arms around her and held her so tightly that if the convulsion within her, whatever it was, tore her to pieces, the pieces must keep to their original shape.

"Stop it, Fran."

She was sobbing, drily, helplessly. Her hands clung to him. Her face was twisted in a spasm. But she wasn't crying. He didn't want her to start crying.

"We'll spend Christmas together anyhow, Fran. You don't want to spend Christmas alone, do you? And neither do I. We'll go out to dinner somewhere right now, some festive place. Between us we have money enough for that."

He was deeply moved, shocked by what she had told him, as sorry for her as he had been for anyone in his life, shaken by her emotion and her helplessness in emotion, touched by the way she clung to him.

"You won't leave me alone?" she said. "You won't, will you, Lucas? I don't want to be alone here on Christmas."

Her need of him was very appealing. He had never liked her so much. He kissed her. A perfectly natural thing to do. A week ago she had flung her arms around his neck and kissed him and it hadn't meant anything except exuberance and gratitude. She had kissed him a second time. For Edwina, she said.

His arms tightened. It was a long time since he had held a girl in his arms who wasn't Edwina. He wouldn't think of Edwina. He was through with Edwina.

"Lucas?"

There was surprise and question in Francy's eyes. But no protest. No rejection. A kiss didn't necessarily mean anything.

But it could mean something. Anything.

"Yes, darling?" he said, hardly knowing what he said. Her lips were parted a little, lifted. A sudden intense awareness and recognition were in her eyes, answering the question. He kissed her instead of speaking, and her lips came alive and gave him back his kiss.

A kiss didn't have to mean anything. But it could mean something. It could mean a sudden wild excitement and a sudden desperate wanting. She knew it as well as he did. Her

knowledge was in her kiss. He wanted her and she knew it and she was glad. There was no rejection in her. He was free to take what he wanted. There was wonderful excitement in being free. There would be sharp delight in taking what was freely given.

12

"I'M being punished," Edwina said, and didn't know she had said it aloud until Miss Lark's cushiony palm smoothed her forehead and Miss Lark answered, "Yes, you are, for disobeying the doctor and going downstairs when you were told to stay in bed. And without your slippers, too."

Edwina began to cry again.

"Oh, my dear, I didn't mean to scold."

"That's not why I'm crying, Miss Lark. I don't know why I'm crying. I can't seem to help it."

"Where do you feel the worst?"

"In my mind. I'm being punished for a mistake I made last September. But I only did what I thought was wise and right. That's what you're supposed to do, isn't it? It wasn't easy to do it, either. It nearly killed me. But I thought it was the only thing to do. And now this war has made everything different and wrong and dreadful. If there hadn't been a war, what I did in September would still seem wise and right. But there is a war and everything's different; everything's changed, just in the time it took one bomb to burst, and not only changed for now and for the future but it's exploded the past, too. Do you see what I mean? All the values we

had and the decisions we made in peacetime seem wrong now, and silly."

She was talking wildly, and she knew that Miss Lark didn't see and only thought she was delirious, but she couldn't stop talking and she couldn't stop crying, either, and she didn't know whether she was crying because she hadn't married Lucas in September or because she was lying forlorn and sick on Christmas night and he hadn't telephoned or sent a wire to find out how she was or say that he still loved her. She didn't know whether her black depression was really guilt and regret about September, or terror about the future, or just stomach pains.

"I'm going to send for the doctor again," said Miss Lark. She was alarmed. Her head was nearly shaking itself off.

"Please don't," Edwina caught hold of her hand and pulled her back to the chair beside the bed. "I'm not any worse. I'm ashamed to be making you so much trouble. But if you'll sit with me a minute longer, I'll be able to sleep."

Miss Lark began to stroke her wrist.

"I used to do this for Papa sometimes when he was nervous. It seemed to quiet him more than having his forehead stroked. When Mamma had a headache she liked me to stroke her forehead, but Papa didn't like to have his head touched."

Lucas, Lucas, where are you? You might have telephoned on Christmas morning. This morning.

Where did all these tears come from? What a tremendous storage tank for tears a woman must keep behind her eyes. Tear ducts were tiny, weren't they? But inexhaustible. The widow's cruse. Yes, that's why she was crying. Because she was widowed. Separation from the person you loved made you a widow.

If I were married to him, she thought, I could bear it better.

If I were his wife, we would belong to each other, two parts of one whole, and I'd have that bond, that belonging, no matter how far apart we were and even if I didn't know where he was. It's true. I know it's true. I didn't know it before. It's why so many people marry before the men go away to war. It's why he wanted me to marry him last September before I came up here to teach. I'm being punished now because I didn't know the truth about marriage. I knew that love was important but I didn't know that belonging was. I thought security, and money in the bank, and a safe place for your child to be born into, were important. But there isn't any such thing as security, and just one bomb can blow banks and homes to atoms, and in May he'll be sent away somewhere to train for war and we may never have a child.

"You mustn't cry so, my dear. Do you feel very bad?"

Yes. In my heart.

"I have to cry, Miss Lark. I can't hold it in any longer. I've been holding it in ever since December seventh. I suppose that's why I'm sick now. If I'd just let go that first week and screamed and yelled all over school the way Miss Oakes did, I'd have been over the first worst shock by now and I'd be up and about, doing something useful. Miss Oakes has been perfectly fine since that outburst she had. She's more composed than any of us. She's making all the arrangements for the faculty First Aid course. And Miss Beatley's wonderful, too. She gets all the fear and worry and tension out of her system by making cracks; she says the Midas casualty list is going to be appalling once the First Aiders begin practicing. She says things like that, and she keeps so cool that nobody dares get panicky anywhere near her, and she lost her two brothers and her sweetheart in the last war, and she has two

nephews on Midway now."

But she's middle-aged and so is Miss Oakes. It's easy to be calm when everything that can happen to your heart has already happened.

"I'm frightened, Miss Lark. I'm a coward. I'm small. I'm petty. I'm a woman. I can be resourceful and reasonably brave and strong about little crises, but not about a war. It's the end of the world and I'm not big enough to face it with courage."

The sodden ball of handkerchief was removed from her hand and a clean one put in its place.

"Of course you're frightened, you poor child, sick and too weak to get out of bed and run if there's a bombing tonight. But I've made arrangements. If there's a raid tonight, as Mrs. Theriault thinks there may be, the chore man from next door is coming in to carry you down to the basement. You know Winifred has cleared out one end of the basement and swept it and I've put black-out curtains over the two little windows and a cot all made up ready for you and I'll sit right by you till the raid is over."

Oh, Miss Lark. Oh, do you think that's what I'm afraid of? Do you think I'm crying because I'm afraid of being bombed?

It would be impossible to explain.

Shame dried up her tears. Shameful to have anyone think you were that sort of coward, afraid for your own skin. And she wasn't. It wasn't her own death she was afraid of. Not that she was brave about that, either; she simply hadn't thought about it. Petty and small again. So much wrapped up in her personal disappointment about Christmas and her personal worry about Lucas being swallowed up in the war that she hadn't even considered the possibility of a Christmas bombing, danger and perhaps death to hundreds of people.

Impossible to explain to Miss Lark. If she tried to, and started talking about Lucas, she would cry again.

Swallow the shame. It may do you good. Like the paregoric. The taste is worse.

"Thank you for telling me, Miss Lark. I feel better already. I think I can sleep now."

Miss Lark beamed. How kind she was. Yes, and brave. She wasn't crying and wringing her hands because her safe tight little world was being turned upside down. She was turning her unaccustomed hand to strange new tasks that Papa and Mamma had never prepared her for, like taping windows and making black-out curtains, clearing out the basement to make a shelter, and putting a pail of sand and a long-handled shovel in the hall. Fifty-eight years old and always protected; excusable if in a crisis she lost what wits she had; but she hadn't lost them. She was behaving well. A whole lot better than I'm behaving, Edwina thought.

"Shall I leave a light on, my dear?"

"I don't think I need it, Miss Lark."

No matter how desperately she needed it, she must do without it. She must learn to live in the dark. Other people were learning.

The dark was smothering. She pushed back the quilt. What a dreadful weight a quilt was. A blanket was just as warm without weighing a ton. There was going to be a shortage of wool, and a shortage of fuel oil. She would have to wear long-leggeds and wrap up in quilts and like it.

Her nightgown was smothering. It wasn't her own nightgown, that was the trouble. It was one of Miss Lark's, voluminous flannelette, with long full sleeves and a high choking neck. She had been too weak and ill to protest when Miss Lark put it on her. Her own gowns were cotton and sleeve-

less, unsuitable for illness in winter.

Why had she ever thought the bedroom was cold?

Well, of course, she had fever. Not enough to be dangerous or to make her delirious. Just enough to make her wretchedly uncomfortable. She had been sunk in depression all day and had slept a good deal, and now she was excited and sleepless. That again was the fever.

Uncomfortable. That's what she had told him. She remembered that much. He had asked her how bad it was and when she had said, "Uncomfortable," he had said he was sorry. He had said it quite gently. He hadn't yelled at her. He had been wonderfully good about the disappointment. He hadn't argued except about rushing to her bedside.

Oh, heavens, she was crying again. She wanted him sitting by her and holding her hand. She wanted him. She was afraid of the dark. The whole world was dark. The whole future. Why hadn't she said, "Yes, come!" and risked the demoralization of the household?

But she wasn't sick enough to indulge herself like that. If she had been dangerously ill, with pneumonia or something that justified summoning the next of kin or the nearest and dearest, it would have been different. But she wasn't in any danger. Just miserably uncomfortable and afraid of the dark.

He would have barged in and taken possession of the house as if he owned it. He always did that with any house, no matter whose. He would have talked loud enough to raise Papa's ghost. His appetite would have shattered Winifred who had never cooked for any man but Papa. He would have dashed in and out of Edwina's bedroom, as unselfconscious about it as if they were already married; but Miss Lark wouldn't have been unselfconscious about it; she would have been horrified, probably; she wasn't used to young men; she

wasn't used to the free and easy ways of a family like the Pancoasts where people dashed in and out of bedrooms without even knocking to borrow clothes or continue a discussion or just to shoo Canfield off the bed.

I couldn't have let him come, Edwina thought. I'm making enough trouble and extra work for Miss Lark and Winifred, as it is, without turning him loose on them. And he would have had a horrid time. Bored to distraction. The worst of it is that when he's bored he drives other people to distraction. And sickness is repulsive. I don't want him to see me like this. When I'm not running to the bathroom or throwing up, I'm either in a stupor or crying my eyes out.

Besides, he has to spend this vacation working hard to get his grades up. Finishing college with high grades means something to him now. It means a commission.

There it was again. The agonizing personal fear, not for herself but for him. She wasn't afraid of death for herself. She was afraid of being left alive, helpless and useless, while he went into danger and the world she knew disintegrated about her. He might come through the war safely. His father had survived the last one and so had hers.

She seldom went so far as to think about his actually being killed. She went only as far as the danger he would be in and then the nightmare terror of the unknown swallowed her power of thinking.

She fumbled for the bedside lamp and switched it on. In the light the terror was a little diminished. Part of the terror of darkness was being alone in it. If she could be near him and see him and touch him and hear his voice once in a while, courage might come to her, perhaps from him.

I must get well, she thought. That's the first thing I must do. Get well, and then I'll go straight to him and marry him

and stay near him for as long as I'm allowed to. I have a little money saved. I'll manage to live somehow. I'll find something I can do; dish-washing; anything, I don't care what. Yes, that's what I must do. It's what I want to do, and he'll want me with him. We'll have till May. We'll have that much. Perhaps by Monday I'll be well enough to travel. Certainly by New Year's.

Whatever terror the new year held for them, they could have the first months of it together.

Now she could sleep. She must. She had to get well quickly. She turned out the lamp and buried her face in the pillow.

The next day, Friday, she was better. By Saturday afternoon she was well enough to sit up in bed and look at the Christmas cards that Miss Lark brought up to her. They were all late because they had gone to the Martineaus' address and the post office had had to forward them.

She was even well enough to feel some slight resentment because Lucas hadn't phoned to ask how she was. If he had gone home for Christmas, and she had no doubt of it, they all knew by now that she was sick and it did seem as if one of them, Hendry or somebody, might have taken the time and trouble to write or telephone. But probably they were much too busy. Lydia was undoubtedly giving a swarm of parties for Elise and George.

Oh well, she thought. Self-pity is a sure sign that I'm convalescing.

She examined the Christmas cards minutely, extracting from them what comfort she could. Her heart warmed. People far less important to her than the Pancoasts had taken the trouble to think of her at Christmas. Some of the cards had only a printed greeting but several had little hastily writ-

ten notes of personal news on the back. She was enormously grateful. She remembered the little stack of cards on her desk that she had thought couldn't be mailed because they said "Peace on earth." But then she had mailed them because other people were mailing cards. How thankful she was now that she had. Why, a gesture of friendliness meant more this Christmas than it ever had in peacetime.

There was a card with the price mark unerased from the Wilkinses, the people with whom she had stayed just after her father's death, kind hearty insensitive people, the salt of the earth but all wrong for dressing a wound. They had treated her as if she were nine years old. Cheer up, dearie, there's chocolate cake for supper. They had tortured her by their kind determination that she shouldn't have time to "mope." Their word for it. No privacy for grief. Not even a minute.

Yet what would she have done if they hadn't taken her in? Miss Louella had helped her to get her clothes ready for college, and when she left them Mr. Hugh had put her on the train with a box of candy done up in gold paper and a book about Girl Scouts, and later, dazed by the size and strangeness of the university and timorous with the Martineaus, she had longed for the warm familiarity of the Wilkinses.

But the Martineaus had been good to her, in their remote way. She had grown almost fond of them. She had never lost her awe of him. But nobody could be afraid, for long, of Mrs. Martineau. A woman in a dream, if ever there was one. When her own grown-up children came home to visit, she looked at them in wonder as if to say, "And who are these strange people? Should I know them?" and she was always relieved when they went away again.

There would be a Christmas card from the Martineaus

about two months after Christmas. She never remembered to send them off in time.

There was a card from Bert Honeywell. He must have asked Miss Louella for the address. Bert, Bert, Edwina thought, dazzled by the return address on the envelope. Bert, you're wonderful. I'm proud to know you. Lt. B. Honeywell, U.S.A.A.F. How wonderful. How proud I am.

Proud to have been the girl he always took to the high-school dances. He never could get his fingernails clean, hard as he scrubbed, because he worked in his father's garage after school, wrist-deep in black grease. A big, rather clumsy boy with a shy nice smile. He had liked her very much but what he really loved and adored was machinery.

She hadn't thought of him in over a year. She hadn't seen him since highschool. They had never been even faintly in love. Yet here was a card from him, while Lucas, who was supposed to love her, hadn't even called up to ask how she was.

He couldn't be angry with her, could he, for disappointing him about Christmas? Maybe he thought she should have gone to him, sick or well. Maybe he didn't believe she was really sick enough to stay in bed a week. He hadn't much patience with other people's illness though he thought he was killed if he had a cold in the head. A cold in the head was about the worst ailment that ever attacked him. He hadn't been really ill since childhood when he caught everything and brought it home to the others and he always got off with a light case, Lydia said, while the younger boys and Elise took weeks to get over their whooping or their spots or their swollen glands.

He had never had a headache in his life. He had never had a toothache. He had never had flu.

But he had taken the disappointment well when she telephoned him. He hadn't yelled once. He had said, "That's too bad," and then, "How bad is it?" and then he had said, "I'm sorry," quite gently, or at least, quietly. And she had said, "I'm sorry, too," and he had said, "Are you?"

Are you. He couldn't have said that. She must have imagined it. The floor had begun to shift under her just then and Pliny's Doves had taken flight and she couldn't remember clearly what Lucas said after that or what she said except that he mustn't think of coming to her and she had said goodbye and gone out like a light. She must have said goodbye. She knew she had said something about love. That she loved him? Something about love.

Miss Lark had come home and found her sitting on the lowest stair, barefooted and demoralized, crying her head off.

I've cried enough in this week, she thought, to last me through the next ten years. There's always a mental slump with influenza. I won't cry any more. I'm getting well.

But she had a set-back in the middle of Sunday night. She woke up, feeling worse than she had at all. She had to get out of bed and feel her way along the hall to the bathroom, and the bathroom light scalded her eyes, and on the way back, in the blinding dark, she went too far and missed the corner and crashed into a chest of drawers where Miss Lark kept bed linen. By the time she reached her own room again, she was dizzy and crying from weakness. She crawled into bed, freezing from her neck down. Her teeth chattered with cold and her whole right side ached where she had bruised herself, and she felt bad enough to die. People did die from flu. They had relapses from getting up too soon and wandering around cold houses and it turned into pneumonia and they died. She didn't want to die alone in the dark without

seeing Lucas again. How surprised he would be, and how perfectly furious. Sorry, too, no doubt, but fury was more natural to him than sorrow. He had never been robbed by death. He wouldn't know how to accept what couldn't be helped. He wouldn't believe it could happen. Not to him.

She tried to imagine herself dead and Lucas beside her, crying, and she couldn't. Not Lucas. He wouldn't believe she was dead. He would say, "What's the big idea, sleeping all the time, Wee Willie?" and then, "Hell's fire, why can't you answer me?"

She laughed out loud, the tears still drowning her. She wanted him. She needed him. If he were here, scolding her, yapping at her, arguing with her, she would get well.

A beam of light came into the room and found her. It was the flashlight that Miss Lark had bought for black-outs.

"Are you worse, my dear?"

"No. Yes. It's nothing. I lost my way in the dark and banged into the Salem chest and got the worst of it. Next time I'll pick something my size. I'm sorry I woke you."

"You didn't, my dear. I was awake. I always wake up every little while in the night. I used to listen for Papa's snore and if I didn't hear it I'd get up and come into his room, this very room, to make sure he was all right."

I guess I won't die after all, Edwina decided. I don't want to be obliged to haunt this room in company with Papa. He would crow over me. People who live to be nearly a hundred are always conceited about it. I'd rather go on living, bad as it is, than to be crowed over for giving up at twenty-one.

Miss Lark turned on the lamp. Edwina blinked at the bright pink woolly dressing gown and the long thick gray braids. She had to bite her lip to keep from exclaiming, "So you do take down your hair at night! You do undress!"

"Why, you're as cold as ice," said Miss Lark, alarmed. "Your teeth are chattering. I must get you some brandy. Papa always said it was the only thing for a chill. I'll be right back."

She bustled away.

Brandy. Not raspberry shrub. Not a beef cube.

Brandy. That must be why he hasn't telephoned. Why didn't I think of that before?

But it's been nearly a week. He never stayed drunk that long. It can't be that.

It must be that. It explains why I haven't heard anything from Hendry or the others. They wouldn't let me spend my Christmas vacation alone and sick without a word from them. Hendry wouldn't.

Exquisite relief flowed through her. She was warm again.

If he didn't go home or send the family word, then nobody at home knows that our plans had to be changed; they don't know I'm sick; why, they must think we're married.

It's all right, she thought happily. We're the same as married. I can stop fretting. Tomorrow or Tuesday or New Year's Eve he'll wake up sober, and he'll either telephone or come. I think he'll come. I'm sure he'll come.

13

He was working at the dining room table when the bell rang and at first he thought it was the telephone. He went down the corridor to the stairs and leaned over the railing.

"Who is it?"

"It's Mom and me!" screamed Hendry.

"We've come to take you home for New Year's," Lydia called.

Hendry pounded up the last flight in a spurt of energy, said, panting, "Hi, stupid. How's Edwina?" and turned to grin at his mother who had paused to catch her breath. "Getting old, Mom. You can't take it. Say, Lucas, why didn't you come home to get married? I don't see why you didn't. You could've had a wedding and I could've been best man. I've never been a best man. It was a good chance with Batty and Fitz both away. I don't see why you didn't. Edwina would've liked me to be best man. I know she would."

Lydia came up, radiant, her black eyes sparkling, her old green hat jaunty with a new cock's feather.

"Don't look so stricken, darling. We wouldn't have burst in like this on your honeymoon if we hadn't had to bring Elise and George to the train anyway and we thought we

might as well take you and Edwina back with us. You needn't come if you'd rather not, but you've had nearly a week alone together and we missed you frightfully at Christmas. We have all your presents waiting for you under the tree but one is a little chewed because Canfield thought it was his and tore open a corner of the wrapping and tried to eat it. Everybody gave him catnip this year and he went on a terrible bender and was pretty foolish."

She kissed him lightly on the cheek.

He found his voice at last, "Edwina isn't here and we aren't married. We changed our plans," and before she could more than open her mouth in astonishment, "What in God's name have you got on that old sheepskin for? You look like a clown."

Hendry leaped into the air and landed with a thud that shook the building.

"Yippeeeeee! Then I can still be best man!"

"What a shame, darling," said Lydia quickly and glanced down at herself. "Do I look so bad? But it's lovely and warm."

His old sheepskin, of all things, that dated back to his farm winter and before that to his freshman year in college, and she had it on over a green wool dress and she even had green studs in her ears and green gloves on her hands.

"I gave my gray fur jacket to Elise. She really needed it and she was sweet about not asking Hen for a new coat because it's war and you have to dress well in New York but at home I can wear any old thing and today was really quite bitter though no snow yet. I can get along perfectly well most times with my heavy suit and a sweater but today was so cold that Hen said to wear everything we had."

He knew she was talking fast to choke off Hendry's questions.

"Wasn't it too bad that Batty and Fitz couldn't get home for Christmas? Hen said of course they couldn't but I kept thinking something might come up to cut the red tape. We kept the house good and full, though. All Elise's friends wanted to look George over and I must say he stood it extremely well, and you'll never believe how much improved Elise is; she's positively neat; that's George; he's strict with her."

For the fourth time Hendry asked, "When are you going to get married?" and this time, tired of getting no answer, he roared it, and Lucas answered shortly, "I don't know."

Hendry groaned.

"Oh, hell! New Year's won't be any fun, nobody but a lot of old people playing bridge. When is Edwina coming to visit us?"

"She sent him a book of magic for Christmas," said Lydia. "He's broken dozens of eggs, practicing."

Hendry brightened. He reached out suddenly and pulled Lucas' nose.

"Eureka!" he said, opening his hand. In the palm was a large white egg. "Now you won't have any more sinus trouble."

"It's only a china one for darning," said Lydia. "With eggs the price they are, I told him he simply must keep out of the icebox. Besides, they make a sickening mess."

Hendry put the egg in his pocket and produced a pack of cards.

"Pick one," he said. "Pick any one."

"Hendricks," said Lydia, "take a powder."

He stared.

"Go on," she said. "I want to talk to Lucas."

"Well, go ahead and talk," said Hendry. "See if I care."

He slid down the banister, fell off, and ran up again.

"Lucas, did I tell you what the man said to the bathtub?"

"Lucas," said his mother, "do you know, I believe I had too many children. I shouldn't have let myself go the way I did. I should have stopped with four."

She pointed to the open door at the corridor's end.

"Could we go in there and lock him out?"

"No," said Lucas. "Mrs. Collier is packing to go south. She doesn't want to see anyone."

"You mean Francy?" cried Lydia, intensely interested. "Is she back? Or didn't she go out to see Scott?"

"Yes, she went," said Lucas with extreme care, "and she came back. She is going to Florida to start divorce proceedings."

"Good heavens," said Lydia.

"Here," said Hendry. "I almost forgot. It's a New Year's present for her. I didn't think she'd be here but I brought it anyhow."

It was an enlargement of Canfield.

"Tell her Canfield sent it to her with his regards."

He put his feet together and jumped three steps down.

"Listen," said Lydia, "this building is pretty old. I'd rather it didn't fall apart while I'm in it."

"I hope it gives her fits," said Hendry.

He jumped three more steps down.

"Cat fits," he said.

When he reached the landing he went in one-legged hops.

"Darling," said Lydia, "who changed the plans? You or she?"

"She did, and I've had enough of it, and I'd prefer not to discuss it."

"Morbid," said Lydia, nodding. "The poor child. Though it isn't surprising when you think how her mother died."

"What on earth do you mean?" he asked.

"Edwina's afraid of having a child. She told me so when we were driving home the night before Thanksgiving. She said that was why she wouldn't marry you in September before she went to Midas. And of course that's why she backed down this Christmas. With the war, and your being in the service, likely to be away from her heaven knows how long, she simply lost her nerve, being afraid anyway. Her mother died in childbirth, you know. Edwina was only thirteen and it was bound to leave a ghastly impression."

"She told you?" he couldn't believe it. "She never told me. She ought to have told me."

"Yes, of course, she ought," his mother agreed, "but it would be an awfully difficult thing to say to a man you loved, and she's very deeply in love with you, as you probably know. She said that being away from you was like being dead."

"She said that? I don't believe it."

He wanted to believe it. He didn't dare to. Lydia had made some wild mistake. It had to be a mistake because if it wasn't, if it was the truth, he was finding it out a week too late. He would never be able to forgive himself.

"You don't believe it?" cried Lydia wrathfully. "Good heavens, I guess Hendry wasn't my only error in judgment. I shouldn't have had any children at all. It's humiliating to find I've mothered a fool."

"Okay," he said. "Go on. What else did she tell you?"

"That was all. Hendry woke up then and she couldn't talk

before him. Of course the rest of us say anything in front of Hendry but Edwina isn't like the rest of us. She'll learn to be more outspoken after she's been married to you a while; she'll have to learn, if she's to survive at all."

"She could say anything to me, I should hope!"

"But obviously," said his mother, "she hasn't. What puzzles me is that you didn't get at least an inkling of how she felt about having a child. You must have talked over the children you were likely to have. Hendricks and I didn't because we were engaged only a few weeks, war weddings are put through in such a hurry, and we didn't have time to think about anything but ourselves and his being sent overseas any moment. And I don't suppose Elise and George had time, either, but they're certainly making up for it now. They've decided not to have their children until the war's over but they discuss them all the time. Elise was in a towering rage all the day after Christmas because George insists that the first boy is to be named Ephraim, it's a name in his family, but I said what of it, he'd be called Slats or Butch or Popeye, something like that."

She was mistaken about Edwina.

If Edwina had had any such fear, she would have told him. A thing as important as that. She was pretty close-mouthed but she would have had to tell him that. If she loved him, it would have come out.

She didn't love him.

Yet why would she tell Lydia that being away from him was like being dead? Lydia could hardly have made that up. She wouldn't.

It hadn't been necessary to say a thing like that to Lydia, who took it for granted that Edwina loved him. Yet it must have been said.

Perhaps she did love him but was afraid of marriage. Some girls were. What she had told Lydia about her fear of having a child might be an excuse. Well, he could soon find out.

"Where's the car, Lydia?"

"Right outside."

"Do you mind going back by train?"

She handed over the keys.

"Not at all. But you'll have to lend me a couple of dollars."

He brought out two crumpled bills.

"Thanks, darling. I'll pay you back by mail tomorrow."

She never would, but he had enough for gas. He could get along.

She kissed him on the cheek again, lightly.

"Hendry will be glad to go home by train. More people to watch. And Hen says we might as well get used to the common carriers. I hate the expression. One thinks of Typhoid Mary. But Hen says by spring there'll be precious few cars on the road. Give Edwina my love."

She started down, walking lightly, wearing her cock's feather and her old sheepskin with her air of being the world's best-dressed, most beautiful woman. She stopped suddenly.

"I forgot to ask. What about Francy Collier's divorce? What for? Or hasn't she told you?"

He shook his head. She would have to get her information elsewhere or not at all.

She waved and went down, out of his sight. She had worked a conjurer's trick. Without any book of magic, either. She didn't require a book. She didn't know what she had done to him. Hendry had helped, unwittingly. Give him his due. Together they had conjured up Edwina.

They were family. They were normal everyday life. They

were everything familiar and accepted. Edwina was real to them, and when they spoke her name and told what she had said and done, her presence was conjured up.

He shut his eyes and he couldn't see her but he felt her presence. She was close enough to touch. He could almost hear her breathe. His little toad. His Wee Willie.

He opened his eyes and there was the long corridor and there she was, at the halfway point, waiting for him, little and sturdy, real, too far away for him to see her face clearly because the light was behind her and the corridor was dim.

He started toward her and she wasn't there. But the place was haunted. She had been here once. How had he been able to forget her so completely? She had been blotted out. She had ceased to exist. Now she was real again, close to him although still unseen, conjured up by the familiar everyday reality of his mother and Hendry.

Going back into the apartment was the hardest thing he had ever had to do.

"Who was it?" Francy asked.

She was standing in the doorway of the living room and luggage was stacked close by, two suitcases and a huge hatbox and an overnight case. She had on a purple suit with a long loose coat and her hat was a bunch of purple violets. The waiting luggage and her composed remoteness suggested someone who by accident had walked into the wrong apartment and would leave immediately but would take one glance around the unknown place before she left.

"My mother," he said, "and Hendry."

"If they had come a little later," she said, "I would have been out of here."

"It didn't make any difference."

"I feel as if I'd already gone," she said, "or as if I'd never lived here."

She glanced about her.

"I'll never come here again. The lease expires in September. By then I should be settled somewhere and I can have packers come in here and crate the furniture."

She turned her back on the room. She looked straight at him. Her eyes were beautiful and blank. He noticed the faint blue shadows under them, and how long and dark her curling lashes were. He noticed the odd shape of her face, the long narrowness of it, the prominent rounded forehead, the small nose, the rounded thrusting chin. It should be easy to remember so odd a face. But he wouldn't remember it. Once she was out of sight, she would be gone completely. He had no mind's eye.

"I don't suppose we'll be seeing each other again," she said with finality.

She said, "I hope I haven't spoiled anything for you."

She said, "I would be sorry if I had."

He shook his head.

"If we never see each other again," she said, "and never think about this week, it will be as if it hadn't happened. I don't want to be obliged to regret anything. I don't want to remember anything. I want to start new tomorrow. New Year's Day is a day for starting new."

If he drove all night, he would be there on the morning of New Year's Day.

"Fran," he said abruptly, "are you going to be all right?"

He had to say it.

"Perfectly all right."

"But you don't like night driving. You're afraid."

"I used to be. I'm not afraid now. I'd rather drive forever

than spend one hour on a train."

He carried her three bags down for her. The hatbox was light, and she carried that. Her car was parked directly in front of the car which all members of his family had driven at one time or another, even Hendry, who was too young for a license but who knew more about the insides of a car than most adults. Edwina had driven it, too.

"Fran," it had to be said. "Fran, I'll go the first part of the way with you. I'll drive for you and when you want to stop I'll come back by train."

He would never reach Edwina by New Year's Day.

But he had to say what he was saying. Anxiety was new to him. Her starting south, alone, on New Year's Eve, was too grim. He was the last person who should start out with her, but who else was there?

"Thanks just as much," she said, "but I'll be all right and I'd rather go alone. I'm not going to drive late. I just want to make a start and somewhere before midnight I'll stop, before the drunken drivers make traveling dangerous. I want to wake up on New Year's morning in a new place that won't remind me of anything I've ever known. Please understand."

Please understand.

She had said that to him once before. Thanksgiving Day. She had sat where she was sitting now, behind the wheel of her little car, talking to him through the open window, asking him please to understand why she had to drive away alone. He had felt a certain responsibility for her and she had released him from that responsibility. He had felt relief, and only that, when she drove away. She was doing the same thing for him now; making it possible for him to watch her drive away and see the last of her, with no anxiety about her or responsibility for her, only relief.

"You don't have to think about me, Lucas," she said. "I'm going to be all right. I ask only one thing of you, and perhaps I'm asking for what isn't possible, but will you do your best for me?"

"What, Fran?"

"Put me completely out of your mind. Blot me out. I want to blot you out, and I don't mean that nastily. It's what I've got to do, and it's going to be harder for me if I know that somewhere you're keeping alive in your mind what I'm trying to convince myself never happened. That's why we mustn't see each other ever again, if we can help it. It isn't because of anything we feel or don't feel for each other; it's because we'll remind each other of too much."

He was growing steadily more confused and uncomfortable. He wasn't at all sure what she was getting at and he wasn't sure that he wanted to know. The one thing he could be sure of was that he wanted her to go and let him start forgetting her. Well, perhaps that was precisely what she was talking about now; that she felt the same way about him. Was there more to it? Something that was clear to her but not to him, that she had figured out and wanted to explain to him?

"You must know what I mean, Lucas. I mean Scott and I mean Edwina. The four of us are all bound together, and if you and I happen to come across each other any time, anywhere, from now on, we're going to make each other wretched because we'll be reminded not of anything between ourselves; that's over and done with; we're going to remind each other of them."

She wasn't looking at him. She was looking straight ahead. She had spoken effortfully, as if she were thinking aloud and trying to think straight and get things clear as much for her-

self as for him. He felt concern for her but it was all in his head, nothing at all in his heart. He realized what she was trying to make clear to him and to herself, and he realized that she felt nothing for him, not friendliness, not dislike, not regret, not anything at all, and it was the same with him, for her. What had brought them together was driving them away from each other. She was the one woman he knew with whom he could never be at ease, the one woman with whom he could never, even momentarily, be in love, not because he had had her but because he had had to have her. He had stopped wanting her, not only because he had had her, but because he could not bear to remember why he had wanted her.

"I've stopped caring about Scott, I hope," she said, not loud but with great distinctness, looking straight ahead. She started the engine. She said something more. It was almost lost in the sound of the engine, but he heard it. She said, "But you're still in love with her, aren't you?"

She drove away.

14

He was shouting her name, over and over, insistently, and with indignation, getting angrier by the second, and she couldn't answer; she couldn't move a muscle. She had known that he would come to her and now he had come and she lay in her bed, helpless to cry out or move. If she was dreaming, this was nightmare. If she was dead, then this was hell. If she was dreaming, she must wake herself up. If she was dead, she must come alive again because he wanted her. She made a terrible effort.

"I'm coming, Lucas!"

She was tripping over the flannelette skirt of the borrowed nightdress. She was in the hall, tottering on weak legs, clinging to the railing. Her own desperate cry had waked her. In sleep she had lunged out of bed.

"Is that you, toad? This damned old fool won't let me in!"

Oh, poor Winifred. He had no patience with the deaf.

"Lucas, she can't hear a word. It's no good yelling. Don't knock her down. Just remove her, gently, and come up."

The shouting that had penetrated her sleep had been directed at Winifred. Apologies to Winifred would have to be conveyed later through Miss Lark.

Miss Lark, too, had been waked.

"Miss Voorhis, Miss Voorhis," she was whispering from her bedroom, the door open a modest inch, "what is the matter? Who is it? I'm not dressed yet."

"It's someone to see me," said Edwina. "It's Lucas Pancoast. I'm going to marry him."

The closing of Miss Lark's door was as shocked as if she had exclaimed out loud, "A man!"

"Oh, Lucas. Oh, darling."

He was up. He was at the top of the stairs. She held out her arms. After a minute, when he did not budge from the top of the stairs, she let her arms drop. They were too heavy to hold up.

He was staring at her, and he was in a rage, but that couldn't be for her, it was left over from Winifred. His eyes were on fire, all the color burned out of them, and his face was dark crimson, thinner than she remembered, the forehead higher and wider, the light eyebrows thicker, the nostrils of his handsome nose flaring a little, his mouth terrible, a grim white line.

"The damned old fool! I asked if this was where you lived and could I see you, that I had to see you instantly, and she isn't deaf, she's feeble-minded, she just stood there, granite-faced, and kept saying No to everything, no matter what I said. I finally asked if this town was Midas, and she said No, and then she said she didn't buy anything at the door."

She clung to the railing, weak as a rag, laughing helplessly.

"I heard you yelling my name while I was still asleep and it gave me a nightmare because I could tell something was wrong, not only because you sounded desperate and furious but because you were calling me by my full name instead of toad."

The sickness was all gone, cured in one sight of him. She was shaky, but that was natural, and she would find strength presently. The laughter had helped.

"What time is it, for goodness' sake?"

As if he would know. He didn't answer.

"I haven't washed my face yet. I look a fright but so do you," she said.

He must have driven all night. The crimson had receded, leaving his face pale and pinched. He was unshaven but with so fair a beard it didn't show much. He looked tired to death, and tense, and there was the same embarrassment and self-consciousness between them that there had been when they first met again on Thanksgiving Day. She wouldn't have felt it, she was positive, if he hadn't, but she caught it from him.

"I've wanted you," she said.

He didn't move a step toward her. She became aware of cold. The hall was freezing.

"I must get my bathrobe," she said.

It was lying across the bed. She hated the sight of it. It looked like a week of illness. But the bedroom was bitterly cold.

"Lucas, will you close this window?"

Struggling with the heavy awkward robe that dragged at her wrists as if it were sheet iron, she heard his quick steps and the thud of the window being closed. She got one arm into a wide sleeve and jabbed and jabbed at the other sleeve. Why didn't he help her? Was she too repulsive to touch? Sickness was repulsive, but love ought to be a little blind. If he had come at a decent hour, her hair would have been brushed and her face powdered and she could have put on a little make-up and the flowered quilted bed jacket Élise had given her last winter for her birthday.

The hateful robe slid off her shoulder and fell around her feet.

"Here," said his voice behind her.

The robe seemed to rise of its own accord. It enveloped her. But when she turned about, he was at the window again.

"You must have been plenty sick to let them put you into that Model T nightgown."

She smiled, reassured, because that sort of comment was like him, but getting no smile from him, she felt her own congeal. He was trying to be natural. Why should he have to try?

"You're nothing but skin and bones," he said, and saying it, or seeing her like that, seemed to hurt him.

"I couldn't keep anything down for the first while. First I thought it was nervous indigestion and then when I started having pains in my middle I thought it was food poisoning. But the doctor said flu."

"Why didn't you let me come to you?" he burst out. He sounded tormented and she was startled. "How did I know that you were really sick? You sounded all right on the phone. I thought you were putting something over on me. I thought you just didn't want to be married at Christmas."

"But I told you! I told you, Lucas!"

"You waited until the last minute," he said, "and then you called up and said coolly that you couldn't come to me for Christmas because you had flu and when I wanted to come to you you said you didn't want me and hung up."

"I didn't hang up. I didn't!"

"You didn't? But the line went dead. I asked you something and you didn't answer and I waited and there wasn't a squeak out of you and I was going to tell the operator we'd been cut off and then it dawned on me that you'd said your

say and you had no intention of arguing any longer. You've done that with me before when we've argued; just buttoned up your lip and been dignified. I figured this time you had done it once too often. All hell wouldn't have made me call you after that. I thought you might call me. I was awake all night, working. If the phone had rung once, I would have heard it. So I was pretty sure by morning that you'd arranged things to suit yourself and I could accept your arrangements or the hell with me."

He had thought she just didn't want to be married at Christmas.

"But I did want to marry you! I wanted to so terribly that I wouldn't give in to being sick! That's why it was worse than it needed to be, when I finally had to give in, and why I'm barely getting over it now when with some people it lasts only two or three days. The doctor said I'd probably been going around with fever the whole week before I finally collapsed. I was light-headed but I thought it was the strain we'd all been living under since war broke out. Half the people in school were sick with one thing or another, and I knew I just couldn't be because I was going to be married at Christmas. And when Miss Lark found out that I was sick, because I fainted, she sent for the doctor and they ganged up on me; they wouldn't let me out of bed even to telephone you. Miss Lark wanted to send a wire, but I knew I had to tell you myself. I didn't want you to get all excited and come rushing up here and not get any work done in the vacation. So I had to wait till she went out of the house and then I crawled downstairs to the telephone. I had to go downstairs on my seat, like a baby, because my legs were so wobbly."

She felt as if she were screaming at him, but her voice came out weak and small and she despised it for sounding as if she

pitied herself. She couldn't look at him. She looked at her hands in her lap and saw how shrunken they were. Just claws.

A good thing that she hadn't had warning before he came, and hadn't put on lipstick and a ribbon in her hair. Let him see that she hadn't fabricated her illness.

"And I didn't hang up on you. You should have known it. You didn't hear any click, did you? I said as much as I could and then I passed out. I didn't put back the receiver till afterward. I don't know how long I was out. Things were all pretty foggy. I couldn't remember much of what I'd said or what you'd said but I was certain I'd told you I loved you. I did say something about love, didn't I, even if I didn't say goodbye? You often hang up without saying goodbye."

"You advised me to go home for Christmas," he said, "and you sent your love to the family. I've wondered sometimes if you didn't like my family a lot better than you've ever liked me."

Exasperation shook her. Sickness had weakened her self-restraint.

"You fool!" she cried wildly.

His mouth widened a little. The corners didn't lift but they deepened. Almost a smile, if a bitter reluctant one.

"That's what Lydia said. You couldn't both be wrong."

So he had gone home for Christmas. He had seen Lydia. Then why hadn't somebody from home sent a line? Not one word, even from Hendry. If they cared anything about her, they could have made some slight effort, no matter how busy they were.

His semblance of a smile had vanished.

"Toad, toad," he said, "why didn't you marry me in September? Or at least, why didn't you tell me why you wouldn't?"

Miss Lark was in the doorway, panting, agitated, her heavy face a little mottled, pink and pasty, her head shaking madly, some of the gray puffs a little off center, one of the silver combs insecurely and crookedly placed. The long thick lobes of her ears looked shockingly naked; she hadn't stopped for the diamond earrings. The cameo brooch was on but it was on crooked, and her pin-striped dark blue morning wool was buttoned wrong all down the front so that she bulged even more than usual.

"Miss Voorhis, Miss Voorhis, what are you thinking of? Out of bed! You must get back into bed immediately."

It was a relief to be thrust back into bed, to sink down on the pillow and be covered up to the chin. But over Miss Lark's shoulder she saw Lucas tight-lipped with irritation. In a minute he would be atrociously rude to Miss Lark. He would tell her to get the hell out. That she owned the house and that he, not she, was the intruder, wouldn't occur to him.

"Miss Lark, this is Lucas Pancoast," Edwina said hurriedly. "We've been engaged for a long time. The family I've told you about, who have been so good to me and with whom I spend all my vacations, who've made up to me for having no family of my own and who seem like my own, are mine only because they're his. If I hadn't been sick, Lucas and I would have had Christmas together. We were counting on it. It meant a special lot to us because around May first he'll be in the Navy. That's why I cried all Christmas Day. It wasn't because I was afraid of being bombed. It was disappointment at having to be apart from him on Christmas."

In Miss Lark sympathy got the better of shyness.

"Why, you poor dears. How sad for both of you. You poor poor dears."

Edwina watched Lucas anxiously. If he would just put

himself out a very little and be nice to Miss Lark, he would dazzle her. He knew how. But he wasn't offering a vestige of friendliness, not even bare politeness.

"What a dreadful disappointment," breathed Miss Lark, and romantic excitement got the better of sympathy, even. Lucas didn't have to dazzle her. She was dazzled by the situation.

"He would have come before," Edwina said, "but I wouldn't let him. I didn't want him to see me the way I was last week. I wanted to be at least partway convalescent before he came. Did you drive up, Lucas?"

"Yes."

"What time did you start?"

"I don't know. Six. Eight. I don't remember."

"You drove all night?" gasped Miss Lark. "Oh, my. Oh, you must be tired."

"I'm not," he said. He sounded almost surly.

"If I could have my face washed," Edwina murmured.

Miss Lark flew to the bowl and pitcher. Papa had liked a bowl and pitcher in his bedroom even after the sewing room had been converted into what passed, at the time, for a modern bath.

Edwina muffled her face in the damp wash cloth. When she came out, Lucas had his back to the room and was staring out of the window. Edwina caught Miss Lark's attentive eye and shaped a word as if she were communicating with Winifred, "Breakfast?"

Miss Lark nodded eagerly.

"Have you had breakfast, Lucas?"

"No," he said. "Yes. I don't remember. I think so. I don't want any."

It's just as well, Edwina thought. You won't get much.

"Could we, Miss Lark?"

"I'll tell Winifred," said Miss Lark. She glanced timidly at Lucas' rigid back. "An egg, perhaps? Papa liked his three and a half minutes, the white set but not hard."

"Perfect," said Edwina. "I hate to make extra trouble."

"You poor dears," said Miss Lark, beaming. "It's no trouble."

She scurried off.

Now he would speak. Now he would come over to the bed in a rush and take her hands and kiss her and say that he loved her. However angry with her he had been at Christmas, he must know now how unfair that anger was and how unwarranted. He must know just from the bedraggled look of her that her illness was authentic. He did know it. He had seemed remorseful a little while before Miss Lark came in.

"Miss Lark is suffering from a severe case of thrill," she said softly.

He turned. He looked as he had on that Thursday evening in September. White, strained, suffering, accusing.

"Why didn't you tell me you were afraid of having a child?"

The breath was squeezed out of her lungs and no more came in.

"Why aren't you honest with me, Edwina? It isn't honest to keep back half of what's in your mind. Telling part isn't enough. I'm bound to get wrong ideas. I'm not a mind-reader."

He came over and half sat, half leaned on the edge of the bed. He picked up her hand, with gentleness, and held it in both of his. He was close to her but far off, too. It was as if he wanted to be close to her but wouldn't let himself be.

"Did you think I'd let you have a child if you didn't want

one or if there's any reason why it wouldn't be safe for you to have one? Do you think I care whether we have children or not? I wouldn't let you take any risk. I wouldn't let you try anything that frightened you."

He was speaking harshly. He sounded as if he were scolding her. But she knew he wasn't. She knew he was saying that he loved her.

She threw herself forward, clutching at him. She seized hold of him with strength she hadn't supposed she had, pulling him to her breast. The stiffness went out of him. He buried his face in the shoulder of Miss Lark's pink-striped flannelette gown. His arms found their way between the gown and the pillow, but he supported her less than he leaned upon her. He rested heavily against her and she had never felt so strong.

"But I'm not afraid!" she said. "I'm not afraid of anything!"

It was true, at least at that moment. She was part of him. She was confident, happy, completed. Nothing divided them. Nothing could. She was married to him. This was marriage, it was oneness, it was each identifying with the other, it was giving and accepting, withholding nothing. Physical union wasn't the whole of marriage; it would only make this oneness more so. Now that she had this, she wanted the other, but the other, without this, would be nothing. This oneness was in the deep heart.

He pulled back from her. The moment was over. Had she only imagined that oneness? Hadn't he felt it with her? They were apart, they were two separate people again. But how could she have felt it if he hadn't?

There was a barrier, and it was in him, not in herself. Always before it had been she who set up barriers. Why had

she? She couldn't remember why she had.

"Toad, toad," he said wretchedly, "you might have told me."

"But how could I when it isn't so?" she cried. "I'm not afraid of having a child! I want one more than anything on earth, anything except being married to you. I've been afraid of a lot of things but never of that! Where did you get such a preposterous idea?"

"You don't have to pretend with me," he said. "For God's sake, be honest. Lydia said you told her."

"Lydia!"

"The night before Thanksgiving, driving home."

What had she said to Lydia? Trying to explain why she hadn't married him in September. Afraid. Yes, of course, she had said that, meaning a different kind of afraid.

"You put me in a horrible position, Edwina, not telling me. You kept postponing marriage but how did I know you had secret fears? You never said much about your mother, except that she was sickly and died when you were thirteen."

"My mother!" exclaimed Edwina. "What has she to do with it?"

"Well," he said, "if she died in childbirth, it may have scared you about having a child yourself. But for God's sake, if she was sickly, why did your father let her have another child?"

"But she wanted another! She wanted one more than anything! She wasn't a bit afraid of having it, or if she was, she never let me guess it. She was wildly happy and that's all I remember. I wasn't old enough to think if she hadn't had the baby she mightn't have died. All I thought was that having a baby was something that just happened, and it was wonderful, and dying was something that just happened, and it was

terrible for us who were left. If you want a child badly enough, you don't think about any risk to yourself. I'm sure Mother didn't. I'm sure I don't."

He was a little bewildered and he didn't want to go on with talk about her mother. She could see that. He wasn't interested in people he hadn't known.

"Tell me just one thing, toad. Do you love me enough to marry me and live with me for the rest of our lives?"

"Oh, I do, I do!" she cried. "I want to marry you as soon as possible and have a child as soon as possible."

"Well, you're not going to have a child," he said, "so you'd better stop wanting what you're not going to have."

"But Lucas, of course we'll have children! It isn't as if I were forty and had a history of bad health, like Mother, and it isn't as if I had something out of place, like Francy!"

He turned his back on her and went over to the window and jerked at it. The room was very cold. Why open a window? Was the atmosphere tainted with sickness? The window stuck. She heard him swearing under his breath.

"Lucas, it's cold as Greenland in here already."

The window went up with a crash.

"Lucas, for pity's sake."

He stood at the open window, his back to her. The silence was like a solid block, invisible but absolutely solid, dividing them. It had sharp corners that hurt her reaching hands. And she had thought, holding him to her breast, that nothing could divide them.

"Lucas, how soon can we be married?"

Take me back with you now. I'm well enough. I'll get up now and dress and go back with you and never leave you. From this moment, if we have to be separated, it will be you

who does the leaving. Oh, take me with you. We have so little time.

"I don't know, Edwina."

"Take me back with you today."

He swung round but he didn't move toward her.

"What about your job?"

"I'll give it up. I've saved a little something. I'll manage somehow. I'll find something to do. Mr. Wace will let me off. He'll have to. He'll understand. It's wartime. The war has changed everything."

"You can't give up a good job," Lucas said. "You've got to take care of yourself with no help from me for God knows how long. It may be years before we get this bloody mess cleaned up. You hang onto your job. It will be a relief to me to know that you have a good one."

They had changed places. He was restraining her recklessness with commonsense. She was snatching at the moment and he was looking ahead.

Or else he just didn't want her to go back with him.

He loved her. She was certain of it. He had never been so restrained about it, yet she was certain he had never loved her so much as now. And he wasn't going to take her back with him. He would marry her sometime, but not yet.

"I have to go back at once," he said. "It will take me most of the day to drive home and I have a stack of work to get through between now and Monday, and you have to get well so that you can start teaching again."

"You don't mean you're going now?" she wailed. "But you've only this moment come!"

He came over to her and kissed her cheek and pushed her down, gently, and drew the quilt up around her shoulders,

tucking it in, taking care of her as if she were sick instead of almost well.

"You can't leave me yet! I won't let you!"

"Goodbye, darling," he said.

She asked in a small voice, "When can I see you again?'

"I don't know. I won't have any time off. If you get a spring vacation, go visit the family and I'll see you when I can."

Spring vacation. But that was Easter. That was April.

"Is it settled about the new speeded-up schedule, Lucas?"

"Yes. We'll graduate the fourth of May."

"And you'll go directly into training?"

"The next day."

"You don't know where?"

He shook his head.

I can't bear it. I can't bear it. I have to bear it.

Batty and Fitz and Lucas and Mr. Pancoast.

"Lucas, what about your father? He's fifty. He's thick around the middle. He puffs when he climbs stairs. He hasn't taken any exercise in years. Will the Army want him?"

"I don't know."

"Has he put the house up for sale?"

"I don't know."

"Wasn't it mentioned when you were at home for Christmas?"

The block of silence was between them again. Presently, through it, from the other side of it, he said, "I didn't go home for Christmas."

"Oh, darling, I'm sorry."

"I'm sorry, too," he said, as if he meant it. As if never in his life had he regretted anything so much.

They spoke around and through the solid block and noth-

ing they said made any impression upon it. There it was, dividing them, tangible silence. She pushed against it wildly, and it was slippery and she couldn't budge it and it had sharp corners that cut into her thrusting hands. In just a minute he would be leaving her, and he wasn't close to her even now. He was in the room with her, looking at her and speaking to her, but he was divided from her by a solid block of things unsaid.

Why was he so terribly bitterly sorry that he hadn't gone home for Christmas? Why had he said, "I'm sorry," in the tone another man might use to say, "Forgive me"?

"Did you get drunk at Christmas?"

"No," he said.

"You hated me the whole of Christmas week! Oh, how could you? It was unjust of you! It's bad enough for us to quarrel when we're together, but it's horrible for you to hate me when we're apart!"

"I didn't hate you," he said slowly, "except just at first. After that I forgot you."

He had forgotten her. Forgotten her. But why did he say it so gravely as if in forgetting her for a little while he had committed a mortal sin against love? She forgot him for hours at a time in school. It wasn't like him to make so much of nothing. She was imagining it. She was still half-sick. She was wild with misery because he was leaving her. She was delirious. He had forgotten her, that was all. It was nothing. Better than hating, surely.

"I won't again," he said. "That's a promise and you can depend on it."

But he couldn't keep a promise like that! Of course he would forget her, time and again, and it wouldn't matter; it would be only temporary.

Miss Lark came in, breathless, carrying a loaded breakfast tray.

"I do hope the egg is right. I do hope so."

He took the tray from her and set it on the bed beside Edwina. He put an arm around Miss Lark.

"Edwina will have to eat the egg," he said. "Make her eat my breakfast and her own, too. She needs fattening. I have to go, but I trust you to take good care of Edwina for me."

Miss Lark blushed and panted.

"Your pin is crooked," said Lucas. "Let me fix it."

He unpinned the cameo brooch and repinned it properly. Her pale blue eyes blinked helplessly. She was dazzled. Her lips quivered.

"There," he said. "That's better."

He smiled down at her very sweetly. He turned to the bed. He reached out and took hold of the little hump that Edwina's feet made under the quilt. He was out of the room and down the stairs and gone. Gone.

15

GONE so quickly. And what was left? The whole terrifying new year stretching out before her. Easter was early April and once April came you couldn't hold back May.

School re-opened the Monday after New Year's. The days were very long, the evenings were too short, the nights didn't exist at all. She put her tired head on the pillow and closed her eyes and instantly Winifred tapped on the door and it was time to crawl out and dress in her bitter-cold room and start another day, and spring was closer by just that much.

Snow fell, not much, enough to collect in the School Street yards and along the outer edge of the sidewalk, enough to crust over and turn gray as soot drifted down upon it. The brittle skeletons of the maple trees rattled their bones when the wind blew. January had never seemed so grim and she had never clung to it with such desperation. She loathed it and was afraid to see it go. She was afraid of spring. Everybody was afraid of spring this year. Spring this year was a promise of terrible summer.

Little fears were lost in the one huge fear that was everybody's fear. It seemed ridiculous that she had ever worried about whether or not she could teach well enough to satisfy

the trustees and Mr. Wace or whether she could make the big boys in her classes behave and make the boy-struck girls settle down to work. What she was teaching seemed ridiculous. No wonder the students chafed. How could anybody make The Ancient Mariner and Ivanhoe and the Idylls of the King seem important compared to the daily papers?

But people have to learn to use their own language, she told herself obstinately. They have to! If they can't speak and write and read and understand their own language, how can they ever learn anything? The Army and the Navy can't use illiterates.

Lucas would have to learn to spell. He could learn anything, once it seemed important to him.

He would have to learn to take orders and stick to a routine and get to places on time or spend all his time in the brig.

Everybody was learning new hard jobs.

"I wonder if I could learn to knit," said Miss Lark. "Mamma always said I wasn't much good with my hands. I tried to do bandages for the Red Cross in the other war, but they were lumpy, and Mamma said I'd better give it up before I was asked to."

There was one minor blessing. With the town organized within an inch of its life, parents had neither time nor inclination to meddle with the instruction which their young received at school. They were too busy going to school themselves, learning First Aid and canteen cookery and how to be wardens.

Miss Oakes was something of a trial.

"She thinks she's the only one of us who knows there's a war going on. She corners us to tell us how serious it is. She recites what was in the morning paper. Does she think the rest of us can't read, Miss Lark?"

The chemistry teacher developed a determined cheeriness that made him hated.

"He keeps telling us we must keep up our morale," Edwina complained. "Our morale wasn't too bad before he started to work on it."

It was perfectly safe, she had found, to talk to Miss Lark about what happened at school. Miss Lark wasn't a gossip.

It would have been perfectly safe, in the autumn, to have told her about Lucas. Not too much, of course, but a little. Now that she knew about him, she was sympathetic and interested but she didn't pry and she wasn't coy. She never talked about him the way Miss Louella had talked about Bert Honeywell.

I might have known she wouldn't, Edwina thought. She's a different piece of goods entirely.

More finely woven, if less durable, than Miss Louella. A gunny sack wore well but it was scratchy worn next to the skin. Miss Lark was not a gunny sack.

By now she knew Lucas' handwriting and when a letter came from him she met Edwina in the front hall after school with a particular radiance. But she asked no questions and made no sly allusions. All she said was, once in a while, "You come home so tired every night, my dear. Oughtn't you to have some hot milk just before bed? If I don't take good care of you, someone will scold me. He said he trusted me to take care of you, you remember."

He was being good about letters. He wrote every week. He didn't give any real news or answer any of her questions but he signed himself, "With all my love." For news she must wait until Hendry got around to writing.

On the twenty-second of January she was twenty-two and Lucas didn't remember but Hendry did. He sent her a birth-

day card luridly painted by himself. On the back of it, under his name, was a large blob of ink marked "Footnote by Canfield." He must have dipped the big cat's paw in ink. She could imagine Canfield's resentment. She could see him licking and licking the pads until his tongue was as black as a chow's. It did her almost as much good as a visit home. It made them all so real.

There was a letter with the card and she labored through it.

"Dear Edwina thank you for the book of magic I took it to school and miss burns confiscated it the old so and so she was pretty mad when I took an egg out of her ear I havent finished the album yet I cant till I see you again and take some more pictures perkins and I have been very busy with war work collecting old newspapers in the neighborhood we are going to collect rubber and iron when the government is ready for it we are out of a maid and mother does the cooking but she is hardly ever home so we eat out she says we can economize by doing our own housework for the duration."

If that wasn't Lydia all over. Three of them eating out would cost more than a maid. Her spurts of economy were always more expensive in the long run than her extravagances. Like the bright orange chintz slip covers that didn't fit; such a lovely color, she said, and such a bargain at twenty dollars, but presently, when she found that they slipped more than they covered, she would pay a seamstress thirty dollars to make them over. And that time last spring when Mr. Pancoast moaned about the enormous laundry bills and she rooted out a young negress who needed money to study for grand opera; in about a month the sheets and towels and shirts went to shreds because the prima donna used an acid bleach for quick results.

"Canfield is feeling fine again," wrote Hendry. "It wasnt fur balls it was ulcerated teeth we took him to the vet and he had the back ones out and now he is very skittish I am going to raise a victory garden later on I started a lot of seedlings in the basement and they were doing fine until Mom emptied a whole bottle of b 1 over them and killed them you are supposed to use a drop to two quarts of water but she didnt read the directions Batty and Fitz are doing fine they havent had a chance to come home yet maybe they will by easter I wonder where they will be sent when they are through training both oceans are pretty busy if the war lasts long enough I am going to join the marines they go everywhere and wherever they are things keep happening fast do you know why your cousin francy collier is getting a divorce love Hendry."

She cried out when she came to that last. But of course it wasn't true. Francy wasn't getting a divorce. Where had he heard a thing like that? Somebody in the town, who knew that Francy and Scott had been separated all summer and autumn, must have started a malicious rumor. Well, a rumor should be stepped on.

Hendry couldn't stop a rumor but Lydia could and would. Like the Marines she went everywhere. She would find out who was telling lies about Scott and his wife.

Edwina wrote Hendry that evening, asking him where he had got such an idea and saying that it was a lie and a mean one and would he please tell his mother to step on the rumor.

A week later he wrote back.

"Dear Edwina it isnt a rumor it is true ask Lucas he was the one who told us he knows all about it she was at the apartment packing up to go south for a divorce when we stopped to get you and Lucas the day before new years only

you werent there we were surprised when Lucas said you werent married because we had thought all the time you were but Im glad you werent because I want to be best man when you are I have never been a best man I have never even seen anybody get married even my own sister it was a dirty trick for her to get married the way she did but I like George he is okay I tried him on that ball and chain puzzle christmastime and he solved it faster than anybody except Lucas when do you get your spring vacation Mom says you must come home if the house isnt sold she says if it is too big to sell we will give it to the red cross or the boy scouts or the welfare association and take a small apartment love Hendry."

Edwina read the first part of the letter again.

So it was true. But it couldn't be true. Lucas would have told her.

But he might not. He hadn't stayed long enough to say anything about anyone except himself and herself. She had been too much worked up to ask him any of the natural inevitable questions she would have asked if he had stayed a little longer.

It was strange, though, that he hadn't mentioned Scott and Francy in his letters since New Year's Day. He could hardly forget a piece of news like that when he was writing to her. Francy divorcing Scott. It was unbelievable.

They love each other! she thought wildly. They love each other the way Lucas and I love each other!

Then she thought, But they can't, because Francy is getting a divorce. I wouldn't divorce Lucas, no matter what he did. Unless he asked me to. Then I would have to, wouldn't I?

Scott must have asked her to divorce him. This is his doing. Oh, poor Francy.

But why?

He had loved her when he married her. He must have. Else why marry? She had pursued him instead of being pursued by him. Lucas said that. Lucas had seen it happening. He had approved. He had cheered her on. It had happened when Scott and Lucas came back to the university after the failure of the dairy farm experiment. Plenty of love affairs started in summer school. Plenty of marriages turned out well no matter who did the pursuing.

Some men preferred to do their own chasing, Lucas said. He himself was one of those. But some had to be chased. He said that only a girl like Francy could possibly have caught Scott. Scott had never had a girl. He was very good-looking but there was something forbidding about him. Stiff. There was no fun in him.

I never really liked him, Edwina thought. I never could see what made her fall in love with him. But you hardly ever can see when it's somebody else. I can understand any girl losing her head over Lucas. But perhaps that's only because I'm in love with him myself.

She remembered all the evenings with Scott and Francy. Scott and Lucas had talked together. Francy and she had talked together.

Scott had gone away from Francy and stayed away and hadn't sent for her. If you loved someone, wouldn't you want that someone with you when you were ill? But of course an illness of the nerves wasn't like grippe or measles. What was it like, anyhow? Did it make you hate everybody, including yourself?

She remembered the things Professor Martineau had said to her about Francy and Scott. He knew Scott pretty well. He took over his graduate students body and soul and he

cared what happened to them.

She had first heard about Francy's marriage from him. He had stalked into her kitchen when she was doing the luncheon dishes and asked her pointblank whether Frances Voorhis was any relation to her. They had been in New Hampshire the whole summer and she hadn't heard a word from or about Francy.

It hadn't been possible to answer all the questions that Professor Martineau had asked her about Francy. How did she know whether Francy was featherbrained or not or whether she would make a good wife for a serious graduate student?

What she hadn't been able to tell him, he had found out soon enough through his private grapevine. What he heard had satisfied him. He hadn't spoken to her again about Scott and Francy until the following May when Scott had left the university.

That had been an astonishing sort of interview. In the four years she had lived with the Martineaus, he had talked with her five times. Really talked. The first three times had been about her work, how she was getting on, what she was planning to major in, what courses she was finding most satisfactory, that sort of thing, friendly, helpful, impersonal. But the fourth time was that chat in the kitchen about Scott's marriage and the next, months later, was all about Francy and Scott.

The things he had said to her! Why had he? Probably he knew by that time that she was to be trusted to keep her mouth shut. He hadn't said she wasn't to tell Francy. Perhaps he had expected her to tell Francy. She hadn't known and she had been afraid to ask.

He had called her into his study and made her sit down and

given her a cigarette which she had been afraid to decline although she almost never smoked. He had lighted it for her and lighted his own and had sat on the edge of his big desk, almost as Lucas would have sat, and had talked to her about Scott almost as Lucas might have talked; about his distress over Scott's crack-up and what a pity it was and that it was anybody's guess how soon or how completely Scott could pull himself together, and that marrying Francy was the best thing Scott could have done for himself, and was Francy likely to stick to him, no matter what?

As if I would have known, Edwina thought. How is anybody ever to know about anyone else? And why didn't he ask me if Scott was likely to stick to her? That didn't seem to enter his mind.

Last May. All those months ago. She wondered madly whether, like Lydia, Professor Martineau had a December birthday and the gift of prophecy.

He had talked about Scott's wanting to get into the war and said flatly that he wouldn't make a soldier no matter how physically fit he was, and said something about the destruction of peacetime values not being enough to make a person adequate for war, because despair couldn't take the place of a natural aptitude, that despair drove some people to recklessness but some were crippled and made passive by it. Something like that. And she had wondered how much he knew and how much he was guessing about Scott. His concern had been plain enough.

Perhaps Lucas knew something about the divorce. She wrote him, begging for enlightenment. His answer came a week later. He said he had been working like the devil, that there had been a lot of nasty cold rain, that he wished to God they would get a little sunshine, and he sent her all his love.

She wrote again. What did he know about Francy and Scott? The news of the divorce had been a great shock to her. Wouldn't he please write her what he knew about it?

His next letter came around the middle of February. He said they had had a blizzard and a practice black-out, that he had seen two movies, both of them lousy, that he was looking forward to seeing her at Easter, that he loved her.

She was puzzled and considerably annoyed.

Toward the end of February there was a thaw. The sky was a watery blue, the air was bland, the piles of dirty snow vanished into the ground. Overnight a raw wind blew the temperature down, snow fell, and it was winter again.

A Christmas greeting came from Mrs. Martineau. There was a note on the back of it but her handwriting was as vague as her manner. Edwina struggled with it a while and gave up. It was probably only an apology, anyway, for mailing the message so late.

Lucas wrote every week but didn't say anything about marrying her. He didn't say, "Come to me. Let's make the most of what little time we have." She couldn't understand it.

She was certain that he loved her just as much as he had before Christmas. She almost thought he loved her more. Then why didn't he want her with him when the time was so short? Other people were getting married in a hurry in order to have a little happiness before the men went to war.

He had said she must hold onto her job. The more she thought about that, the thinner it sounded. It wasn't like him. He was undoubtedly more serious and more sensible now than he had been before the declaration of war; so was everybody else; but she couldn't believe that his character had undergone a complete sea change.

The people she saw the most of had been different from

themselves, either better or worse, for the first days immediately after Pearl Harbor. But now they had made their adjustments and seemed pretty much what they had been before. Miss Lark was more upset about finding red spider on her ivy than she was about the war news. Dr. Theriault still fretted about the amount of starch in his collars, and Miss Oakes, at school, could still talk for an hour about the best kind of rinse for white hair. Miss Beatley was still sardonic and aloof, the chemistry teacher still envious of Mr. Wace's authority.

They were all older than Lucas, of course. Perhaps the young men who were actually going to fight the war had changed more suddenly and more completely than the older people who were going to fight on the home front. But a complete character change? From recklessness to caution? That sort of change?

She couldn't believe it of Lucas. He wouldn't suddenly develop notions about a war marriage being unfair to her. Her father had had ideas like that. He and her mother had waited until the war was over. But Lucas' father and Lydia hadn't waited and Lydia wouldn't have had it any different. Lucas' father was planning to go off now and leave Lydia to fend for herself and Hendry. Lucas seemed to think that was all right.

Why doesn't he send for me? she wondered. If he wanted me at Christmas, why doesn't he want me now? He knows I'd go to him in a minute. I told him so on New Year's morning. I said it. I said, "Take me back with you today." And he said, "You can't give up a good job. Hang onto your job."

The more she thought about New Year's morning, the less sense it made. He had been tired to death, after driving all night; he had been shocked to find how ill she was; he had

been, for him, almost remorseful. Hadn't he? But he had kept himself far off from her. There had been something dividing them. There had been something.

For that one moment when he had buried his face in her shoulder and seemed to rest upon her, she had felt really close to him in her heart. Then he had withdrawn again. He had kept far off. Not mere physical distance, either. Something in his mind. And he had gone away suddenly, in a great rush, after driving all that way to see her. There couldn't have been any such rush as all that.

What had happened to him between Christmas and New Year's? He hadn't gone home. He hadn't gotten drunk. What had he done?

He had forgotten her. He was sorry he had forgotten her. "I'm sorry. I won't again." Sorry he hadn't gone home for Christmas. Sorry he had forgotten her; he wouldn't again. As if it were important. As if he had been treacherous to her in forgetting her for a little while.

It didn't make sense. It wasn't like him to make such a lot out of practically nothing.

It wasn't like him.

What did a man do to forget a girl, if he didn't get drunk?

She turned a little cold.

Why, of course. He made love to another girl, didn't he?

I wonder whom. He knows people I don't know. He makes new friends quickly. He's probably made any number of new friends just this winter since I've been away. He may have gone to a round of Christmas parties and met a swarm of attractive girls.

It hurt to think of his making love, however casually, to someone new and attractive. It hurt more than it should.

Furious with her. Pretending to everybody, including him-

self, that he was emotionally unattached.

It hurt and it made her a little angry.

I wouldn't have forgotten him so easily! she thought. No matter how furious I was with him, it wouldn't give me any satisfaction to let some strange man make love to me.

Then she thought, How do I know it wouldn't? I don't know any strange and attractive men. There aren't any around here. There isn't a single one, young one, left in the whole of Midas. The Army and the Navy have got them all.

But there are always pretty girls everywhere. Always!

Jealous, she thought. My, what a bright girl I am. Jealous of somebody who may not even exist.

I'm not jealous. I don't care whom he kissed or how many he kissed. I hope it was several rather than just one. Yes, I do care. I hate her. I hate them all.

She flung herself face down across the bed.

She wanted to be with him. She wanted him. Why didn't he send for her? Of all times when they ought to be together, certainly now was the most important time. Anything could happen in the summer. He might be sent for his training to a place where she couldn't follow or be near him.

If he had wanted her at Christmas, and he had wanted her, why didn't he want her now? It wasn't just the war that was making the difference. The war had started days before Christmas.

It was bad for them to be separated. He had known that better than she had back in September. He had tried and tried to keep her with him. He could have her with him now. Later he couldn't.

It was bad for people in love to be apart too long. That was one abominable thing about a war. One of the many. All things about a war were abominable.

Why didn't he send for her?

She went over to the desk and took the little calendar out of its pigeonhole. A new little calendar with the first two months torn off it. Her spring vacation didn't start until the twenty-eighth of March. She would go to Lydia whether the house was sold or not. She would go to Lydia. Lydia had been young and in love in the other war and she had gone ahead and married and started her first child while the war was still going on.

I wonder if my mother would rather not have waited? I wonder if she'd rather have gone ahead and married Father and started me instead of waiting till he came back from the war? I wonder!

I'll talk to Lydia about it, she thought. I can't talk to my mother about it. I'll never know how my mother felt about it. I wish I knew.

She turned the top leaf of the calendar and looked at April. A little little month. On Easter Monday her spring vacation ended. Exactly twenty-eight days after Easter Monday, four tiny weeks, if Lucas passed his final examinations and passed them well, he would be graduated. In uniform.

16

THEY were out on the side lawn, too full of business to notice her approach. Hendry and Lydia were painting the porch chairs. Canfield and Mr. Pancoast were looking on.

She walked slowly. Her overnight case was heavy. Miss Lark had sent four jars of jam to Lucas, raspberry, gooseberry, strawberry, plum. Mamma's recipes.

The afternoon was hot, the sky brilliant, almost cloudless. Her winter coat was a burden. It was strange to be approaching Lucas' house by herself. They had always come together.

"Canfieeeeeeld!" Lydia shrieked. "You get away! Hen, grab him!"

Mr. Pancoast grabbed and missed. He was sitting on a box, smoking one of his tiny cigars that weren't much thicker than dark brown cigarettes but had a much thicker fragrance. From where she stood on the sidewalk, resting a moment before she announced herself, he looked exactly as usual, comfortable, solid, brown-and-ruddy, not a day older than when she had seen him last, at Thanksgiving, in another world. The upstanding fluff on top of his head moved gently in an occasional breath of spring wind. Lucas' hair rose up from his head like that but it was thick and crisp, too much alive to lie

down willingly. She had never thought of any faintest resemblance between Lucas and his father. But if you added thirty years to Lucas, and thirty pounds, and took away some of his hair, mightn't he be rather more like Hendricks than like Lydia? You had to remember that in between Lucas' spurts of feverish energy, he could be about the most indolent person alive, whereas Lydia never stopped rushing around. And certainly, no matter how young you might have caught Lydia and no matter how much discipline you might have applied, you couldn't have made an engineer out of her. Not possibly. Precision was beyond her.

"Hey, Mom!" bellowed Hendry, sitting back on his heels. "You got that in my hair! You pretty nearly got it in my eye."

"I always wanted a red-haired child," his mother said blithely.

She plunged her brush in the paint-can, drew it out, reeking, and slapped it across a chair-back. She had on one of her home-work costumes, assembled from bits and pieces of everybody's wardrobe. The faded blue shirt was obviously one of her husband's, the sleeves rolled up, the tails billowing out over what could only be pyjama trousers, candy-striped, discarded by Fitz or Batty who, summer and winter, wore only tops. The red leather bedroom slippers must be Hendry's since they were small and broad. The wide-brimmed white straw hat, adorned with water lilies, had been Elise's several summers ago. Only the gloves were new, blue-cuffed white work gloves, many sizes too large, the kind you bought at the dime store for so much a glove.

"If you've got to splash," said Hendry irritably, "I wish you'd splash on yourself. You never do."

Canfield was walking around on his tiptoes, watching for

a chance to dart at a moving brush or a shadow, very sprightly for a fat old man.

The perfect usualness was incredible. She hadn't supposed that anything or anybody could ever look so usual again. It was like last summer. Like peacetime.

If the house were sold, or about to be sold, they would hardly be painting the porch chairs, would they?

"Look who's here," said Mr. Pancoast.

He had seen her.

"Darling!" screamed Lydia and flew across the grass. "I can't touch you. I'm all paint. Hen, kiss her for me. You're the only one who's fit to. Put her bag on the porch. Aren't you suffocated in that coat, darling? Such a hot day! That's why we're painting. Last summer we painted on a damp day, do you remember, and the chairs came off on everybody for months. How did you get here so early? We didn't expect you for hours. Lucas won't be out till dinner time."

"Miss Beatley was driving to Vermont and gave me a lift and I had good luck with assorted buses."

Edwina handed her bag and coat to Mr. Pancoast.

"Heavy," he said.

"Jam," she answered.

"You want to help paint?" asked Hendry. "We've got extra brushes. Pop has a wonderful set of brushes, every size. Say, I got my book of magic back. Miss Burns said she was relieved to find it was only card tricks and such. She said, knowing me, she'd expected a treatise on demonology. She doesn't like me very well. I was afraid maybe she wouldn't promote me this year but she said try and stop her. If we can get hold of a rabbit somewhere, Perkins and I are going to give a show of magic and sell tickets to buy war stamps. The rabbit stuff is old but people expect it."

"Do you like the color we're doing the porch chairs?" asked Lydia. "We couldn't afford to paint the house and it's impossible to get workmen, anyway, so we thought we'd brighten up the porch, at least, for morale. Will you hold onto Canfield until we finish? He's possessed to walk on fresh paint and then he goes in and wipes his feet on every bedspread in the house."

Edwina sat down on the box with Canfield in her lap. He lay on his back, relaxed and sleepy, his yellow eyes half shut, his pink tongue showing between his teeth. Mr. Pancoast came and sat on the other half of the box, his arm around her.

"You all right?" he asked.

"Perfectly," she answered. She was at home again. Lucas was coming soon. With her heavy coat off she could enjoy the sun on her head and shoulders. This, this blue sky, this bland air, the faint green showing through the dead yellow grass of the lawn, this was the spring she had dreaded. What had she dreaded? For a little while she would forget what it was, pretend there was nothing.

Why, at any moment Batty and Fitz and Justine and the rest of their gang would come swarming out of the house, bound for the afternoon movies or a baseball game or banana splits at the drug store.

Highschool seniors a year ago. Only a little more mature than the boys she was teaching now. Miss Beatley had the seniors.

Hendry and Lydia were both talking at once.

"Thinner," said Mr. Pancoast and touched Edwina's cheek. "Missed you at Christmas."

That was what he had meant, asking her if she was all right. Harking back to her Christmas illness. She had mentioned it in writing to Hendry.

"Too bad about Christmas," said Mr. Pancoast.

Did he mean her illness or the postponed marriage or both? Too bad was a masterpiece of understatement.

"We're going to raise a Victory garden where all this lawn is," Lydia was saying, and Hendry said, "What do you mean, we? I'm going to raise it and you and Canfield have got to keep out. You know what you did to my seedlings, and you know what that old cat did to my tomato plants last year just when they were getting started. I had a dozen, Edwina, and that old cat chewed the tops of some and the rest he lay on and you know what he weighs."

"Nonsense, it was cutworms," said Lydia, "you have to put collars on them, I guess I know, I've been attending Garden Club meetings for years. We're going to have a neighborhood canning center in my kitchen this summer, Edwina, isn't it a grand idea? Mrs. Haven is going to supervise. Everybody with a Victory garden will bring stuff here to can. Oh, by the way, did Hendry write you that Fitz has a new girl? For keeps, I think. You'll never guess who. Justine."

"That old Justine," growled Hendry. "All the years I've been working to get her out of the family and she's still in."

"They fixed it up when the boys were home week before last and Batty seems quite pleased about the transfer; now it will be his turn to have a girl in every port; and Fitz is very happy, and we are, too, the Havens are such good friends of us all."

"No friends of mine," said Hendry. "Hey! Make Canfield stop licking his feet! They're all painty! He'll be sick!"

"He'll get wrist-drop," said Lydia. "I heard that in a lecture."

"I'm going to plant cucumbers right here, Edwina," said Hendry.

Was there a war? Somewhere. Batty and Fitz would soon be on their way to find it. Yet Lydia chattered on about them as casually as if she expected them to turn up with Lucas in time for dinner. She chattered on about whether the porch furniture would dry by Easter Sunday, and about what to plant in the garden, and about the new suit she had bought for Easter. She talked as if this spring and the coming summer were like other springs and other summers.

"Three-piece, darling, with yellow flecks, and I can wear the top coat with anything and it's very warm. It cost a lot but Hen said I must get something warm after I gave Elise my gray fur jacket. I was tired of the jacket anyhow."

There was a war; not here; not yet; but Batty and Fitz would soon be part of it, and early in May Lucas would start training for it, and George soon after that, and perhaps by fall even Mr. Pancoast, if he could get his affairs into shape and if the Army could use him somewhere.

"As for summer squash," said Lydia, "I'm opposed to it. It's a hundred and ten percent water. You don't have to use poison for cucumber beetles, just any white powder, talc will do and it won't hurt Canfield. You sprinkle it on and the beetles breathe it and it gets into their sinuses and they have to go to the mountains for the rest of the season."

She had flung herself down on the grass and tossed off her hat and the sunlight showed up all the lines in her face. She looked worn and not young and yet wonderfully vital with her black eyes sparkling from her husband to her son to Edwina.

You couldn't be sure whether she really was as scatterbrained as she pretended to be or whether it was pretense. She talked off the top of her mind and the only kind of response she disliked was being taken too seriously. She loved

having people around; she loved almost any company except her own. She found routine dull and she really enjoyed confusion; a series of domestic crises excited her and she liked keeping just one jump ahead of chaos.

She had had five children and let them come up as they would. "I told them they needn't expect me to stand over them and make them brush their teeth and take baths and that sort of thing; they could just read the ads and find out what happened to people who didn't. And they needn't come to me for advice because what if it was bad and they followed it?"

Her children squabbled with her and laughed with her and at her and seemed satisfied to have her the way she was, and her husband seemed perfectly satisfied, too. If she had her moments of secret agony and wept on his breast, he never gave her away.

She never seemed to worry about herself or anyone else. Lucas swore that she didn't. "When she had that abdominal tumor she went around bragging to everybody that she was pregnant again and wasn't she remarkable, at forty-five, almost as good as Sarah in the Bible. She said the doctor didn't know what he was talking about, calling it a tumor; how would he know? He'd never had a baby and she'd had five, and she wanted another daughter anyway, she was going to call it Myrtle because wasn't that what you wore a wreath of for outstanding achievement? She went on like that and I swear she wasn't a particle frightened and neither was I until I was sitting with Pop, just waiting, and the hospital smell or the waiting got both of us down and he told me what he was afraid of and he said she had known all the time, and he cried. I couldn't stand it. I went and got plastered. I came out of it about the same time she did and when I told her she nearly

ripped out the stitches laughing."

Edwina had wondered more than once if he would do the same when she had their baby, and whether, if he did, she would laugh about it afterward and be flattered that he should have felt such deep concern, or whether she would be furious with him.

She wondered sometimes if he felt deep concern that she didn't know about; if he fooled her at times the way she suspected that Lydia fooled her. She might have to live with him years and years before she saw through him as clearly as Mr. Pancoast must see through Lydia. He was rather like Lydia and a little bit like Mr. Pancoast but mostly he was himself and marriage with him wouldn't be the easiest thing in the world but it ought to be wonderful.

"What do you hear from your cousin Francy?" asked Lydia.

"I don't hear. I hoped you might know something."

"I've been out several times to see Scott's mother," said Lydia, "but she won't talk. I daresay she can't. It's so long since she's had anyone to talk to that her jaw has rusted shut."

She squinted at the sun and clapped her hat on her forehead, tipping her head far back to see out from under the brim. Her narrowed eyes and lifted nose and chin produced an effect of immense hauteur.

"Do you know that old man didn't leave her a penny? Not one beehive, not one grapevine, not one goat. I hope he's frying in some vegetarian hell. He left Scott everything but Scott hasn't come home so she just goes on living there, on what I can't imagine unless the cellar is full of turnips. It must be gloomy for her. No car. If she had a car she wouldn't know how to drive it. She can't get away from the place except on foot."

Hendry threw down his brush.

"If she had a car she couldn't get tires for it. This war makes me so damned mad!" he glanced at Edwina. "So blamed mad. All these years, ever since I was born, I've been waiting for a driver's license, and when I'm nearly old enough there's nothing to drive because I'm not old enough yet to drive a tank. I lose out all round."

"Darling," said Lydia, "go take a bath in turpentine. You're bleeding paint from every pore."

He looked down at himself. He was naked to the waist. His hands were crimson. He rubbed his chest, blending the spatters into a horrid smear.

"Goozley, goozley," he said. "Edwina, when you get married to Lucas, can I be best man?"

"It wouldn't be safe," said his mother. "You'd take out an egg instead of the ring."

"I would not!"

"Go wash," said his mother.

"And put those brushes to soak," said Mr. Pancoast. "Those are my brushes."

"I must dress," said Lydia. "Lucas will be along soon and I've asked a dozen people in for the evening."

Oh, not this evening! Edwina protested silently. Our first evening, and I haven't seen him since New Year's.

"Tired?" asked Mr. Pancoast.

"A little," she said and let him take Canfield and followed him into the house.

She had seen the living room dusty and out of order but she had never seen it so depressing. Usually it was full of family and they distracted attention from it. The orange slip covers were badly wrinkled. The table and both sofas were stacked with newspapers, magazines, and victrola records. On

the mantel were two dark brown apple cores and a copper bowl full of dead calendulas. And a dozen people were coming in for the evening.

"Mercy, look at those calendulas," said Lydia, doing nothing about them. "No, don't touch them, darling. Come up and talk to me while I have my bath. We can tidy this up later on."

Later on she and Hendry would go through the room like a hurricane and sweep it clean, or almost clean, in about two minutes, the last two minutes before the guests walked in.

"I'll take a look at the pantry shelf," she said. "There must be something we can throw together for dinner."

Mr. Pancoast moved some magazines and sat down. Edwina threw the apple cores in a waste basket. She turned around and looked at Mr. Pancoast. She asked in a low voice, "Does Lydia worry?"

He hesitated. Perhaps it was unfair to expect him to give Lydia away.

"About the war, and the boys getting into it. Does she? Because if she manages not to, I'd like to know how."

He looked tired. Yes, he did look older than he had in the fall. There was a definite sag. The lines were deeper.

"Keeps busy," he said.

"And she has you," Edwina said. "She rests on you."

He gave her a really cheerful smile. He said, "Be over by Christmas," and added, after a moment, "I hope."

He wasn't stupid. She didn't spoil it by asking which Christmas. He might be an optimist by temperament; but he wasn't stupid.

Upstairs the water was roaring into the tub and Lydia was shrieking, "Come up and talk to me!" Edwina went up. The bathroom was full of white vapor. On the walls were painted

sky and sand and turquoise water and palm trees that showed dimly through the white steam as through fog. Lydia liked to say it was Bermuda, "And right there is where we stayed," pointing to a spot northeast of the hopper.

She turned the water off and stepped into the tub.

"Do you think your cousin has fallen in love with somebody else?"

"Francy?" Edwina cried, a little indignant. "I certainly don't think."

"Well, I just wondered," said Lydia. "I saw her only the once. But she has that kind of mouth."

"What kind of mouth?"

"A falling-in-love kind. Or perhaps love isn't what I mean. But he shouldn't have left her alone so long."

"I don't know anything about the divorce," Edwina said, "but I know Francy and I know it's all Scott's fault."

"That's just what I'm saying," answered Lydia.

The steam cleared away. Lydia, with a white bath towel pinned around her head, soaped herself lavishly. Her neck was middle-aged, her shoulders young and beautiful.

"I'm not blaming Francy," she said. "I wouldn't blame any woman for divorcing any Collier. Scott isn't one bit more human than his father, even if he did take to meat-eating when he went to college. Maybe he doesn't like his mother; frankly, I don't warm up to her myself; if she had any gumption, she would have taken her neck out from under old Mr. Collier's boot. But Scott ought to do something about her. He hasn't communicated with her in any way since his father's death. I'm not the person, I realize, to say he should write to her, because I never write to anybody. But if he's too ill to travel and can't come to see her, he could telephone, couldn't he?"

"If he were that ill," said Edwina, "Francy wouldn't be divorcing him. Even if he asked her to, she wouldn't. Did you see her when you were at the apartment, Lydia, the day before New Year's? Was she much upset?"

"I didn't see her. I didn't go in," said Lydia. "Hendry was with me and he was pretty bouncy. I knew she must be low in her mind, and being bounced on wouldn't help her any. He took a dislike to her at Thanksgiving, you remember, on Canfield's account and when he dislikes a person he can be irritating."

"Was Lucas low in his mind? Was he angry with me for having disappointed him about Christmas?"

"He was angry with me for expecting you to be there when you weren't. I was so sure you were married. It wasn't pleasant for him to have us land upon him, screaming for you. I have never had a less cordial welcome."

"Where did he spend Christmas?"

"Why, I never thought to ask," said Lydia. "With friends, I suppose. He knows thousands of people."

"Yes," Edwina said. "Yes. With friends. There are always a lot of Christmas parties and an attractive man is welcome anywhere. He probably went to a lot of dances and met a lot of pretty girls who thought he was unattached and gave him the time of his life. He was ashamed to tell me so, afterward, when he found out how sick I'd been. He really seemed quite remorseful. I hadn't supposed he was capable of feeling remorse about anything. But I guess he is. He's been awfully good about writing ever since New Year's. He's written to me every week, and that means something when he's working so frightfully hard."

Certainly it meant something. It meant that he loved her, didn't it? But he hadn't said anything about marrying her. Well, he might, tonight. If not tonight, tomorrow.

17

He put his lips close to her ear, "Let's get out of this, toad."

She nodded. They edged their way to the hall.

"Too many people," he said and she answered, "Many too many!" and looked thankful at the prospect of escape. The living room was jammed. His mother had invited people for Sunday dinner and some for tea and more had dropped in unasked, as they always did on a Sunday, and you couldn't hear yourself think.

From the top of the stairs Hendry shouted, "Where you going?"

"Out," said Lucas.

"Fine!" said Hendry and galloped down. He had his camera.

"Fine for us," said Lucas. "We'll see you later."

"Oh, I'm coming with you," said Hendry. "The light is just right for me to take some pictures of Edwina. I have to take a lot to fill up the album I'm making for her Christmas present."

"Last Christmas or next Christmas?" asked Lucas.

"Last, and here it is nearly April."

"You can take pictures all this week," Edwina said.

"But it may rain all week."

"It may," said Lucas, "or it may even snow. Goodbye."

Hendry glared at him.

"You make me sick!"

"Then be sick in private, not around us," said Lucas.

Hendry looked appealingly at Edwina. She said, "We'll see you later, darling," and Hendry blinked. He said, "Okay," sighing.

They went across the porch and down the steps.

"Where shall we go?" she asked.

"Anywhere," said Lucas.

She tucked her hand in his. The sunlight was dazzling.

On the side lawn the porch furniture stood drying, the metal chairs grouped sociably around the table.

"Heavens," she said, "do you see what I see?"

Canfield lay on the table, a ball of glossy black on glossy red, his nose tucked under his tail.

"I hope the paint is dry," she said.

They went across the grass and she tested the surface of the table with a fingertip.

"It sticks a little."

"He's in for a surprise when he wakes up," said Lucas. "Shall I wake him now?"

"No, don't. You're not supposed to. You let them lie."

"That's dogs."

"It's anything. It's a way of saying, Don't ask questions."

She stroked the cat. He made a rumbling sound that ended in a snuffle.

"Poor old man. He snores," she said. "We'll have to get a clothespin for his nose. It's hard to see how Francy could have been afraid of him, isn't it?"

Something like an icy finger touched the back of his neck.

He wished she wouldn't. He did wish she wouldn't. But it was perfectly natural that she should. He couldn't stop her. He couldn't say, "Don't speak of her!"

"I suppose it's more disgust than fear," she said. "The way I am with snakes. Even the perfectly harmless ones give me the shudders. It's the furtive secret way they move, I think."

He didn't like them, either. He didn't at all like being made to feel like one. If he could tell her! He couldn't. He never could. She would go on and on, making her perfectly natural casual references to Francy, making him sweat blood, making him feel like—

"Of course some people," she said, and the little dent in her cheek deepened, "don't care for toads. But at least there's nothing furtive about them."

He would have told her anything about himself, anything. But he couldn't bring Francy into it.

"Do you like my new dress, Lucas?"

"Yes," he said. "Do you know, I've discovered that I do have a mind's eye. I must have had it all the time but it was blind. It still has limited vision but I can use it."

No face but hers. Wherever he was, from now on, no matter how far away from her, he would have her with him. Her little round warm-colored face with the nose that tipped up ever so slightly. Her little mouth. Her blue eyes. The sunshine gave her eyelashes gold tips. She was so damned pretty.

"I memorized you New Year's morning."

He had begun to love her then. He couldn't tell her that. He had loved her before. He thought he had. But the morning he had barged into Miss Lark's, it had been different. Different. And he hadn't felt fit to touch her. He couldn't tell her why.

"I hope you didn't memorize Miss Lark's nightgown. It

would embarrass her," she said. "Do you know when I bought this dress? Months ago. Away back in December when I was buying Christmas cards. I've never worn it, but with Easter coming, I thought I might as well. Do you really like it? I particularly wanted you to like it."

He did, of course. How could he help it? And made the way she was, how could she help looking pretty in anything or nothing? But a light-colored dress did make her eyes more blue. She had a little gold chain close up around her neck. Her neck was warm-looking and creamy.

"You don't think it's schoolmarmish?" she persisted.

He shook his head, puzzled and a little dizzy.

"I bought it to be married in," she said.

Her sweetness took him by the throat. He couldn't speak. There she was, waiting for him to say something, her lips parted a little, her eyes fixed on him, waiting. He wanted to cry out, "I'm sorry! Forgive me!" but how could he without saying more than that?

He couldn't tell her. He had been sorry for things at times, and had kicked himself or asked someone else to kick him, and that had taken care of the regret. He had never understood people who lay awake nights fretting about what couldn't be helped. But now he knew what it felt like to be sorry for something done that couldn't be undone, to feel at once helpless and agonized.

She looked frightened.

"Lucas. Have I said something I shouldn't?"

"Oh God," he said. "No, darling. No, of course not."

"Then what is it that I keep coming up against? There was something when I saw you last, on New Year's, something between us, shutting us away from each other. I

thought when I saw you this time it would be gone. But it isn't. What is it?"

"Edwina," he said, "Edwina, darling—"

He stopped. Hendry had appeared on the porch.

"Say, listen!" Hendry's voice was put-upon and patient and maddeningly reasonable. "Listen, if you're just going to stand around, why can't I take pictures?"

"We're just leaving," said Lucas. He seized Edwina's elbow and started walking her toward the garage, but Hendry, catching sight of Canfield, gave a yell of fury and raced across the grass, and Edwina turned back.

"It's almost dry, Hendry," she said placatingly.

Hendry scooped up the cat and flung him down on the grass. Canfield, after one plaintive squeak, recovered his calm and began to wash himself.

"What did you let him get up there for?" Hendry wailed. "Look at that paint! It's all hairs!"

"Don't yell at me," said Lucas. "They're not my hairs and he isn't my cat and he was up there when we came out."

"They'll brush off," said Edwina.

Hendry brushed.

"They will not! The paint isn't dry! Look at it! All marked up and hairy!"

"You can give it a second coat," said Lucas.

"No, I can't! The paint's all used up and we can't get any more! Mom had to go all over town to get the color she wanted and there were only two cans in the whole town!"

He was stretching out the conversation to keep them near him.

"She wasted half of it," he said. "She splashed half of it on the grass. Look! You can see where she splashed it and I was going to plant cucumbers right here and now they won't

grow. The paint'll poison the ground. Hey, where are you going?"

"Don't answer him," said Lucas.

They were at the garage door.

"You can't take the car out!" Hendry called. "It's got a flat."

Lucas rolled back the door.

"Listen," said Hendry, "if you want to mend the inner tube, I can help you. Do you think you could mend it?"

Lucas turned.

"Listen," he said, "listen yourself. If I puncture one of your inner tubes, do you think you could mend it?"

Hendry, very nonchalant, lifted Canfield by the tail and let him drop. Lucas waited. Hendry looked up again.

"Say, Lucas, what did Mrs. Collier think of the picture? Did she have a fit?"

"What picture?" Edwina asked. "What on earth is he talking about, Lucas?"

He didn't know what his face was like, but as she looked up into it, he saw hers change from casual interest to alarm. She turned on Hendry who was strolling toward them.

"Hendry," she said, coldly and clearly, "we've never had much little-brother-trouble from you. We don't want any. You're old enough to know when you aren't wanted."

Hendry's mouth fell open. Lucas was a little startled himself. He had never heard her speak to Hendry like that. It was her schoolmarm voice.

The car was unlocked. That meant that Lydia had had it out last.

"Even in these days," he said, "a car has its uses."

Privacy for a little while. Hendry was gone.

"Put your arms around me, Lucas," she said.

She put her arms around his neck and kissed him without waiting for him to kiss her, something she rarely did.

"Tell me about Francy and Scott," she said. "I've been wanting all week-end to ask about them but there were too many people around. Is she really divorcing Scott?"

There was no getting out of it now. He had known she would ask and that he would have to answer as best he could.

"All I know," he said, trying to be casual, "is that she went to Florida to start proceedings. That's all I know."

"You know why she's divorcing him, don't you? You saw her when she came back from the west?"

"Yes," he said. "Yes, I saw her."

"Well, what happened between her and Scott?"

"He made it clear that he was through with her."

"Lucas! You mean he'd just stopped loving her?"

"He never did love her. He made it quite clear."

"Lucas, how horrible."

"Yes," he said, "it was. Horrible. It doesn't bear talking about or thinking about. Let's not. Please."

She was silent for a little while, clinging to him, her forehead against his cheek.

"Lucas, do you know whereabouts in Florida she is? I'd like to write to her. I don't know what I could say but I'd like to try to say something. I'd like her to feel she still has people of her own. We're the same as her own. I am, and you're going to be when you're married to me. Do you remember what she said at Thanksgiving when she was so happy and excited about Scott's coming home? She kept saying how grateful she was to you and how glad she was that you were marrying into the family and that she hadn't any family now except me because she feels alienated from both her parents

now that they're alienated from each other? Do you remember?"

He didn't answer.

"Oh, poor Francy," she said. "I hate to think of her all alone down there in some strange city. Did she tell you whereabouts she would be?"

"No, she didn't!"

She dropped her arms.

"I'm sorry, Edwina. I didn't mean to yap at you."

"It's all right," she said. "I expect you hate thinking about it. It must have been pretty awful, being there when she came home. And you weren't feeling particularly happy yourself."

She rested against him as if she wanted nothing so much as to be close to him. As if she couldn't get close enough.

Whatever punishment he had coming to him, however bad it ought to be, this was it. She had never been so loving or seemed to want loving so much, and all the while she kept talking and talking and talking about Francy, making him feel—

"You were there when she got back to the apartment?"

"Yes."

"When was that?"

He wouldn't lie to her. He wouldn't tell her more than she asked, but he wouldn't lie. Not to her.

"Christmas Eve."

She clutched him suddenly and kissed his mouth.

"Oh, darling, oh, darling!" she sounded wildly happy. "Did you spend Christmas with her? You did, didn't you? You wouldn't have let her spend it by herself when she was so wretched? I know you wouldn't!"

His mind turned upside down.

"Oh, darling!" she said, laughing, kissing him again, stran-

gling him with her arms around his neck. "You didn't go to a lot of Christmas parties and have a lovely time without me, did you? You didn't meet some new girl different from me and make love to her, did you? I've been such a jealous fool. I was so puzzled about Christmas and the week after because you wouldn't say where you were and you didn't go home and you said you forgot me, and I tried to think what a man would do to forget a girl if he didn't get drunk and all I could think of was find some other girl and make love to her, and I couldn't bear the idea of your making love to anyone but me. But you didn't, did you?"

"Yes," he said.

He heard the quick intake of her breath. Now, he thought, her arms would drop. She would pull away from him. Her voice would lose that lovely loving excited warmth.

But her arms tightened. She pressed herself against him.

"I don't care if you did. Because it didn't count, did it? No, don't tell me. You don't have to. I'm not that sort of wife. I am your wife. I know it didn't count. You were angry with me, and hurt, and you thought I had let you down, and when you found I hadn't and that I really had been sick, you were sorry. You could make love to a dozen girls but it wouldn't count, would it? You love me. I know you do. You do, don't you?"

"Yes, Edwina. Yes, darling."

"And I'm your wife. I really am, even if we aren't married yet. We belong, the way Lydia and your father do, and the way Scott and poor Francy didn't. We always will. Oh, Lucas, I'm happy. This is marriage, isn't it? What we have now. The way we feel about each other. Not just the loving each other, but the belonging. The other part, that we'll have later, will only make this more real. Isn't that true? That

without this, the physical part wouldn't mean much? But if we have both, we're really married, like your father and Lydia."

"Yes, darling," he said, shaken.

The tension went out of him slowly. There was nothing dividing them. Nothing. The barrier of things unsaid was gone. She had pushed it aside, done away with it. There was no barrier. There was nothing now that had to be said, not even "I'm sorry." Not even "Forgive me." Not even that he loved her, and only her, because she knew.

Lydia was calling to them from the back steps. She was crossing the dark back yard, calling to them. There was something strange about the way she called. She sounded anxious, and for her, subdued.

"Edwina? Lucas?" she was at the door of the garage. "Are you in here? Oh, where are you?"

It wasn't her voice at all. Forlorn and lost. That wasn't Lydia.

"Yes, we're here," said Lucas. "What's the matter? You sound as if the world had come to an end. Did you think we'd run out on you? We didn't run far. We wanted a little privacy, that was all. You know how it is. You can remember that far back, can't you?"

He could see her face, a pale blur moving toward the car, but that was all he could see of her. The darkness was very black and her old black velvet dress was lost in it.

"Join us," he said. "Plenty of room in the front seat."

But she sat down on the running board and her voice, coming up to them from below, was thin and full of distress, "Justine's mother came in a few minutes ago. She's just heard something about Scott Collier."

"What was it?"

"I feel like a beast," she said. "The way I've talked. The perfectly heartless way. But how did I know? I just thought he was selfish and irresponsible, not doing anything about his mother when his father hadn't left her any money. I never liked him. I never liked his father. When I don't like people, I take it out on them by talking about them."

"You haven't said anything very bad, Lyddy."

"I made fun of them," she said, "and now I feel awful about it. He's come home, Lucas. Not his own home. He went there first, of course. I don't know just when. But Friday morning people found him wandering around the cemetery, Mrs. Haven says, and now he's at Dr. Maule's."

"Where?" asked Edwina. "Who's Dr. Maule?"

"He was out there looking for his father," said Lydia. "Not for his father's grave. For his father. Calling for him. Like a child. How he ever got to the cemetery without being picked up, I don't know, but it was early morning when people saw him, and he may have gone over in the night. He was almost stark naked. He's gone back to his childhood. You know his father kept him at home and taught him at home so that he wouldn't catch anything at school, and had him go around practically naked summer and winter to build up his resistance, and he did grow up to be fairly rugged but what's the good of making a child into a good physical specimen if you can't build up any resistance in his mind?"

Edwina stepped down from the car. When Lucas followed, she found his hand and gripped it.

"Dr. Maule has a kind of private asylum," he said.

"Oh, poor Francy. Poor Francy," she whispered.

"She's well out of it," he said. "She got out just in time."

"Oh, how can you say that?" she cried.

"It's true. She had her hell a few months in advance, that's all."

"But she's going to blame herself, Lucas! Can't you see how she's going to feel? As if she had let him down when he needed her the most! Don't mentally unbalanced people often turn against the ones they care the most about? Their wives and parents and own children? She loved him so much, Lucas! You know she did! And if she's forced herself to stop loving him, it's only because she thought he didn't love her any more and didn't want her, and now she's going to blame herself and feel that she ought to have stuck to him, no matter what."

He heard her give a little gasp, almost a cry.

"You don't think Professor Martineau can have guessed that this might happen? Oh, he ought to have warned me so that I could warn her! No, I don't believe he guessed. Lucas, I wish I knew where she was!"

"Well, she isn't in Florida," he said shortly. "For all I know she's at her own apartment. I passed her on the street ten days or two weeks ago. I don't recall just when. I was rushing to a class. I haven't seen her to speak to."

"You passed her on the street two weeks ago?" Edwina said. "Why didn't you tell me before? You knew she was in town and you haven't even tried to see her and find out how she was?"

Her amazement stung him.

"I haven't any time for social calls!"

Her fingers tightened on his.

"Of course you haven't. I know that, darling."

Not sarcastic. Penitent. He wished she wouldn't. Better if she snapped his head off.

"But you will go and see her? You'll make time?" humbly.

"She doesn't want to see me!" he exploded. "I'm the last person she wants to see! And I don't even know if she's still around. I don't know why she came back to the apartment. She said she wasn't going to."

"Why, to clear it out," Edwina said. "She couldn't just turn packers loose. I don't suppose she took much south with her, did she? Everything she owns is at the apartment. I don't mean just the furnishings, but all her personal things. How awful to have to clear out a place where you've been happy! I wonder if I could help. I'd better go in with you on the early bus tomorrow. That's what I'll do. I'll go and see her. I couldn't be so near and not go."

Lydia shrieked suddenly, and his nerves twitched.

"Lydia, for God's sake!"

"There's a bat in here," said Lydia. "It just swished past my face. Let's get out of here. They carry lice."

In the kitchen Edwina said, "I'll go upstairs. I don't want to talk to people."

A babble of voices reached them from the living room.

She started up the back stairs. After a moment's hesitation he followed. Hendry's door was shut. Together they went on to Elise's room. He turned on all the lights. Elise had always wanted a blaze of light. There were half a dozen junky little bright-colored pottery lamps with gaudy shades. The flood of light on the bright red rug and yellow curtains was somehow reassuring.

Edwina frowned, her hands at her temples.

"Headache, darling?"

"No," she said. "The light's so sudden and so bright after all that blackness. Why didn't you tell me you had seen Francy?" But she didn't ask as if she cared about an answer, really, or as if his not telling her had any real significance.

She glanced about her. She dropped into the wing chair, which was nearest, and huddled herself as if she were cold. Against the bright plaid gingham of the chair-back, red and blue, her hair and face looked pale and cold. Her face looked shrunken, almost ill, as it had on New Year's morning. Even her eyes looked smaller, as they did when she was very tired or when there was too much light in a room.

"I don't know what to do, Lucas. Tell me what to do. Should I tell Francy about Scott, if she hasn't heard, or if she's going away at once, should I let her go and trust to her never finding out? If she has to know, it would be better for her to hear it from you or me, not just from some casual acquaintance she might pass on the street."

As Francy had passed him. She had gone by without speaking, walking more rapidly than she used to walk, and he had been too much and too unpleasantly surprised by the sight of her to call after her. Then he had remembered that being spoken to by him was the last thing she wanted.

"Don't tell her, darling. She's through with Scott and when she's through with somebody she doesn't bother about regret. She goes straight ahead with no looking back over her shoulder."

Edwina nodded.

"That's how she was about her parents. She felt awful about their separating, but she accepted it and put it out of her mind, almost as if they had both died. But she had Scott then. Now she hasn't anybody but us."

He couldn't go on looking at her, meeting her troubled eyes, troubled himself on her account, loving her, wanting to pick her up and comfort her and knowing that kind of comfort wouldn't serve. He moved about the room, noticing oddments Elise had once adored and then wearied of and finally

left behind her. Enameled boxes, fancy perfume bottles, long-legged wilted dolls and pudgy dolls, candle-holders shaped like water lilies, candles shaped like snow men smoking pipes, dozens of pictures cluttering up the walls, all tiny and all bright-colored, a row of red and green and blue glass and china animals marching along a painted shelf. She was a perfect jackdaw for collecting bits of shiny rubbish. The animals she had wanted to take with her to New York but George had said he would not sleep in a zoo.

The blue glass antelope had a broken neck. The liquid cement which Elise had slapped on to mend it made an uneven collar for it and some had trickled down and hardened on the fragile forelegs. A typical Sloppy job.

"Lucas, I dread seeing her. Will you go with me?"

"No!" he said violently.

"But, Lucas, she'll talk to you, and listen to you, when she won't to me. She doesn't think I'm capable of loving. She thinks I don't understand what love and suffering are like. But you've been with her at all the crucial times. It was you she kept turning to at Thanksgiving, not to me. You told her when Scott's father died. You put her on the train to go to Scott. You were at the apartment when she came back. She told you about Scott's cruelty. You're really closer to her than I am."

"No!" he said.

"I don't understand. You passed her on the street and didn't speak to her. You didn't go to see her. You won't go now. You didn't even say she was back in town when I asked you where she was. Whenever I start to talk about her—"

Her eyes, fixed on his face, grew wider and seemed to turn a darker blue.

"That's what puts up the barrier between us, isn't it?

Whenever anybody mentions Francy or Christmas week—"

She couldn't fail to guess. His face alone would be enough. And she wasn't stupid. Innocent, but not stupid.

She had said herself that when a man wanted to forget a girl, if he didn't get drunk, he found some other girl to make love to. She had said it herself, but by love-making she had meant something innocent, what she herself had had with him.

"It wasn't Francy, was it?" her voice was small and high, completely without expression. His face answered her. She answered herself, "It was Francy, wasn't it?" and he knew that for her its being Francy made it worse, because she knew Francy. She knew what love-making meant with Francy; how far it went.

He went to her and put his hands on the chair's two wings, bending over her, enclosing her without touching her, shutting out everyone, everything, holding her eyes with his, loving her with his eyes.

"You said you didn't care, and you're not to care. You said that, with your arms around my neck, out in the car. Do you remember? You said you didn't care because it didn't count. It didn't count. It couldn't. I forgot you but I won't again. Not ever. I love you. You know that. You're my wife. You said you were. You remember saying it. You said we belonged, even if we weren't married yet. It's still true, isn't it? You know it is."

Her eyes didn't waver. She seemed to hear him and understand what he was saying.

But she didn't answer.

"It's true, isn't it?"

She didn't so much as move her lips.

As quietly as he knew how to speak, he asked, "Why don't you answer me?"

She said slowly, "Yes. It's true. If you say it is."

"What happened has nothing to do with you and me, Edwina. I'm sorry it happened. I'm terribly sorry. It was something that just flared up, without any warning, and then went out completely. You're not to be hurt because of it. You're not to think of it ever again. You're not to care."

"I don't care," she said. That small expressionless voice!

From the downstairs hall rose a great clamor. Lydia's guests were taking their leave. Hendry came out of his room to investigate. He stuck his head in at Elise's door.

"I didn't know you were up here," he said. "Why didn't you let me know you were up here?"

The voices from below swelled louder and through them and above them rose Lydia's, strident and cheerful, "But he may get over it! He may be perfectly well inside of a year! It may be one of those war psychoses we used to hear about in the other war. Only you don't get over a psychosis, do you? Well, then, I don't believe that's what he has!"

"What's a psychosis?" Hendry asked. "I never did know. I used to think it was parrot fever but that's psittacosis. I know because I looked it up. Is a psychosis anything like that? That's incurable. I've never known anybody with parrot fever. And who's Mom talking about?"

18

THE door was opening and she knew it couldn't be Hendry because he was in his parents' bedroom. She could hear him telling them to wake up, that Lucas was ready to leave.

She lay quiet with her eyes shut and presently she knew that Lucas was standing by the bed, looking down at her.

They had gone to bed late, around two in the morning, all of them, and Lucas had kissed her goodnight and goodbye-for-a-while and told her not to wake up when he left to catch his early bus. But here he was standing beside her bed, hoping that she would wake up. Willing her to. She could feel the insistence of his eyes that were trying to wake her. He wanted to say goodbye again. Kiss her once more. He wanted her awake when he kissed her. She must give him what he wanted. She must. She could not move. It was too much effort. Her eyelids were weighted down.

His lips were against her cheek, his head pressing into the pillow. He was kneeling beside the bed. His arm lay across her, the weight of it hurting her breast. He was trying to coax her awake without speaking.

"Hey, stupid," that was Hendry, whispering hoarsely, and the whisper told his disgust for people who must be always

kissing, "get a move on. You'll miss your bus."

She must open her eyes. She must hold out her arms.

She lay heavy as stone.

She heard the closing of the door. Voices, subdued, and Lydia's sudden squawk of laughter, hastily muffled. Feet on the stairs, a clatter. That would be Hendry. Lydia called from a window, "See you Saturday! Come out as early as you can!"

He was gone.

She opened her eyes. Sunlight glowed through the yellow curtains and picked out highlights on bits of glass and metal, all the bright-colored junky little things that Elise so loved. It was curious that some people had a definite taste for trash and clutter.

She moved her arm and it struck against something solid. Oh. The book she had sat up all night reading. She looked at it, wondering what it was about. She couldn't recall a word of it. She had finished it just before six and a few minutes later she had heard the whirring of Hendry, the human alarm clock.

It must be a very stupid book. She recalled the effort of keeping her mind on it, how laboriously she had ploughed through page after page, sometimes shaping the words with her lips, sometimes going back to re-read a paragraph, not because it was worth re-reading but because having read it once she had forgotten it instantly.

Well, there were plenty of others in Mr. Pancoast's library. Or she could keep on re-reading this one all the week. But perhaps there wouldn't be many empty moments to fill. Lydia would have people in to lunch and to tea and to dinner, and there would be lectures to attend, and discussion groups, and club meetings. The week would pass. Lydia, being what she

was, would fill it full.

I'll go back Saturday. I'll make some good excuse for going Saturday. If I travel all day Sunday I'll be too tired to face my classes on Monday morning. That's a good excuse.

A week from today, she thought wistfully. I wish it were now.

What a relief to have every hour planned and occupied with simple definite things like split infinitives and dangling participles and misspelled words. What a relief to be Miss Voorhis. Miss Voorhis had no private life, or if she had one, she kept it at home in a bureau drawer, not to be looked at or even thought about until after school.

He was gone.

She raised herself a little against the pillow. She ought to feel bad about his being gone. She ought to feel something.

He had knelt beside her and shared her pillow and kissed her cheek and his arm had rested heavily on her breast, and she hadn't stirred; her breathing had been as quiet and regular as if she had really slept. But if she had been asleep, his touch would have waked her.

Why had she pretended sleep? How could she have? She hadn't willed to.

Her mind moved painfully as if it were stiff and sore. He had told her she wasn't to think. But how strange that she could have lain so quiet and let him go without feeling anything. She wouldn't have supposed that she could be close to him, or even in the same room with him, under the same roof, or in the same town, or the same world, and feel nothing, no leap of the heart, no sparkle of warmth in her bloodstream.

The sunlight hurt her eyes. Foolish to stay awake all night, reading something stupid, forcing herself to read page after page, minute after minute. Why had she done it?

She turned away from the windows and saw the red and blue plaid chair. He had leaned over her, encircling her without touching her, his hands grasping the chair-wings, holding her with his bright compelling eyes, speaking quietly to her, not shouting at her. Nobody else had such brilliant eyes, except Lydia, and hers didn't fix and hold you; they darted about. And black eyes hadn't the same sort of brightness as light eyes.

What had he done to her? Hypnotized her?

You're not to care. You're not to be hurt. You're not to think of it ever again. You're not to care.

Well, I don't care. I don't. Nothing hurts except that my eyes smart a little from reading all night, and my mind is tired and stiff; it creaks. But if you say I'm not to think, I'll try not to. Only you mustn't mind if I don't stay through this coming Saturday.

She pressed her face into the pillow. Perhaps she could sleep. She could hear the shower going. Mr. Pancoast always took plenty of time.

If she stayed until Easter morning she couldn't pretend to be asleep when Lucas put his arms around her. She didn't want to see him again until this curious deadness wore off, as of course it would wear off. He mustn't think she was deliberately withholding love, to punish him. She wouldn't be as small as that and he mustn't be given a chance to think it.

He loved her. She could think about that quite safely because it was what he would want her to think about. He loved her, and something that flared up and went out quickly wasn't love.

When you loved a person very much and he loved you and there was something unsaid between you, dividing you, like a block of silence, you kept pushing against it blindly

and stupidly and hurting yourself on the corners of it, but you couldn't let it alone or stay away from it, and if it was something he really wanted to tell you because he hated keeping things secret from you, and if you kept saying things that had to do with what he couldn't tell you, then finally you guessed or you read his mind or something. Finally you knew. It didn't take any great discernment to guess a thing like that. It took a pretty simple mind not to have guessed before. Whenever one name was referred to, by anyone, Hendry or Lydia or anybody, you came up bang against that block of silence.

There was a tap on the door and she sat up. She had had a nightmare, hadn't she? It was only a nightmare. But how could she have dreamed when she hadn't slept all night?

The doorknob was turning. I can't. I can't go through a dose of cat, she thought. I won't. I don't want fifteen pounds of cat landing on my stomach.

The door opened but there was no sign of Canfield. Hendry's face came round the door, his brown eyes eager, his short nose and the tops of his cheeks reddened and shiny from soap and water, his hair very flat, its silkiness spoiled by treatment with a dripping comb.

"Hey! I knocked. Didn't you hear me?"

"Yes, I heard you."

He looked surprised.

"You didn't say come in."

He came in anyway, not in pyjamas and the too-big dressing gown cast off by Fitz, but dressed for school in his squeaking corduroys and a dark blue polo shirt that fitted his solid little torso as intimately as any of Miss Lark's dresses fitted hers. He seemed older by years and inches than he had at Thanksgiving. Old enough, Edwina thought with a rush

of irritation, not to barge into people's bedrooms uninvited. It occurred to her, as an unpleasant surprise, that he wasn't a child any longer and that while he had been lovable as a little boy he would be intolerable as an adolescent.

"Say, listen, Edwina, I had a swell idea!"

Exasperated, she wondered why he had to begin almost any statement or question with "Say, listen" or "Hey" or "Look." Her students had the same trick.

"Lucas says you're going to get married the Saturday before he graduates because he'll be starting training the very next day, the day after he graduates, I mean, and I thought if you didn't mind waiting a little longer for me to finish your Christmas present I could take a lot of pictures of you being married and coming out of the church and throwing your bouquet and cutting the cake and all. I've never taken any pictures of a bride and the ones I've seen are never any good, they're all just alike, standing around posed to show off a lot of clothes, but I bet I could get some really good shots, funny ones."

I bet you could, too, she thought with cold dislike.

"You hardly ever see any funny pictures of brides," said Hendry. "It would make a good finish for the album, wouldn't it?"

"No, it wouldn't," she answered flatly. "You can't take pictures of my wedding because I'm not going to have a wedding."

He stared.

"Why, Lucas said—"

"He said we were going to be married and we are, but not in a church; in the minister's study; we'll just walk in and say a few words before the minister and that will be all there is to it. There won't be any guests."

"Well, gosh, I don't want to take pictures of any guests! I just want to—"

"We haven't any money to throw around," she said, "and I haven't any family to give me an elaborate wedding so—"

"You have us!" he burst out.

That should have touched her. It didn't.

"So we're going to be married quietly. It's the only decent way to be married in wartime."

"Well, gosh!" he said. "Mom had eight bridesmaids and three hundred guests and a big reception, and that was wartime—"

"Moreover," she interrupted, "we'll have only the weekend because I shall be taking the train back to Midas on Sunday night so naturally what little time we have we want to ourselves."

He was ready to cry with disappointment so he blustered.

"You mean you're going to sneak off the way George and Sloppy did, and I think it's rotten mean not to let any of us have any fun throwing rice or old shoes or—"

"We're not going to sneak!" she said angrily. The word annoyed her beyond all reason. Everything he said annoyed her. His sharpness in picking her up on that slip about the only decent way to be married in wartime; putting her in the position of criticizing Lydia. "You know that we're going to be married and when. You're receiving fair notice. But you aren't invited. Nobody's invited."

"I think it's mean!" he said. "I don't see why you don't want us. I bet you're going to invite that old Francy and I think you—"

"I don't care what you think!" she cried. "I don't want to discuss it!"

"Well, gosh," he complained, "I don't see how I'm ever

going to get that old album finished if you don't let me—"

"Then don't finish it!" she snapped. "I don't care if you never do! I don't care what you do with it, only please go away, I want this room to myself, I want to get up and dress!"

His face crimsoned, not in a rush the way Lucas' did when he was angry, but slowly and painfully. He slid off the edge of the bed and stood irresolute as if he couldn't believe that he wasn't wanted. Yesterday, too, she had told him in no uncertain tone that he wasn't wanted. He had turned very red yesterday, too, and she had been sorry. She wasn't sorry now. It was time that he learned to behave like a civilized human being. He was nearly thirteen.

"Didn't you hear me?" she asked. "I said I wanted to get up and dress. Try not to be a pest, Hendry."

He went out quickly, leaving the door ajar. Now she would have to get up and close it. Well, she might as well get up anyway. Mr. Pancoast was out of the bathroom and Lydia was in and she never took long, a lick and a promise. Edwina could hear her singing, if you could call it singing. What a voice. If you had never seen her expressive face or come within reach of her physical magnetism because magnetism was what she gave off to catch you, a whirring dynamo had a kind of fascination, if you had heard only her voice without ever having seen her, you would never want to see her or come near her. It was really a dreadful voice.

"Da da dadada," she sang jubilantly, "da dada da!"

There was hardly a popular tune that she didn't know from start to finish, she could go straight through as accurately as a victrola record, but not a word could she keep in her head so she sang "Da da."

Edwina lay back. She might as well stay in bed till the

bathroom was free. No wonder the house wouldn't sell with only one bath to six bedrooms. Fabulously expensive to heat, too. The new oil furnace cost more to run than the old coal-burning one, and everybody said there wouldn't be enough fuel oil next winter so who wanted to buy a large house heated by oil?

How she had agonized all these months, expecting the house to be snapped up at any moment and Mr. Pancoast snapped into Army service. As if the Army wanted men of his age. He would have to pull all sorts of wires to get in and he would be put at desk work somewhere, perhaps quite near by. A man of fifty, who hadn't taken any exercise since the last war, would be only a handicap to a fighting Army. He would have to stay at a desk while the young men died.

Hendry rushed past the door and down the stairs. What good fortune that he had school this week; his vacations didn't coincide with hers; for hours of every day he would be out of the house.

And on Saturday morning she would leave. She would make up some good excuse for cutting her visit short by a day. They would think it queer for her to leave when Lucas was coming out; whatever excuse she made, they would think it queer; well, let them.

She lay still, trying to make her mind a blank. But the maddening "Da da da dada" filled up the blank. She tried to think about school, Mr. Wace, Miss Beatley, the First Aid course, the assignments, the book reviews, the themes; about the Navy sweater she had to finish; someone would need it; Batty or Fitz or some other. What a good thing that Miss Louella had taught her to knit, to keep her busy, to keep her from "moping" in those long weeks of grief and isolation.

Mr. Pancoast must be smoking in his bedroom. He didn't

usually smoke a cigar before breakfast. What a remarkably nasty odor came from those tiny cigars of his.

She stepped out of bed and went to close her door against the unpleasant smoke but a whiff came to her nostrils like wool burning. That wasn't tobacco. She slipped on her dressing gown and went to the top of the stairs. The smoke was coming from below, and it wasn't bacon or toast burning. She went down.

The living room fireplace was belching smoke and on his haunches Hendry squatted, feeding the fire.

"What on earth are you up to?" she asked.

He answered over his shoulder, not looking around, "What does it look like?" rudely, and threw a handful of something into the fireplace.

"Burning up some old trash," he said, "and it's my old trash so I can burn it if I want to, I guess," in a belligerent what-business-is-it-of-yours tone.

"You'll have us all smoked like hams," she said and went to look over his shoulder. Her own face looked up at her from an enlarged snapshot pasted neatly on a stiff black page. He ripped out the page and tore it across and across and threw the bits of her into the fireplace.

"Hendry, don't do that!"

She reached. He eluded her hand.

"Hendry, it's mine!"

"You don't want it," he said, "and if you don't I guess nobody does. I sure don't!"

"Hendry, give it to me!"

He jerked away from her and threw the whole album, what remained of it, on the fire. She snatched it off. It was barely scorched. The flames were weak and small. More smoke than fire. She peered more closely through the smoke.

"What book is that?" she asked and when he didn't reply she knew. "I suppose it's the book of magic. Oh yes, and there's the scarf I knitted for you. I thought I smelled burning wool."

She dropped onto one of the sofas, holding the album tightly. She didn't know why she had rescued it. Reflex action. She certainly put no value upon it.

"You're just like Lucas," she said with anger. "You fly off the handle over nothing, just because somebody who cares about you and whom you care about does something you don't like, or fails to do what you want, or frustrates you, you set about destroying everything—everything that links you—everything that can remind you—you do something irrevocable—"

She was speaking wildly, and not to him. To Lucas. The reproaches, the grief, the bitterness—

She set her teeth. Never to anyone, even to herself, would she say such things.

Hendry was glaring at her as if he meant to tear the album from her.

"I want that to burn, do you hear?" he bawled. "I guess I can burn up what I want to burn up if it belongs to me! I made it myself, didn't I?"

Had he ever loved her? Well, he didn't now. She had destroyed his love. But how unfair, how idiotic of him to make such a terrific fuss over a trifle, a few harsh words, a moment's weakness, the first mistake she had ever made with him. How cruelly unreasonable. His whole family yapped at him and he took it for granted; it slid off him. She was going to be one of the family. He might as well get used to her being human, she wasn't perfect, he had to find out sometime that she wasn't perfect, nobody was.

Whom did she think she was defending? Herself or Lucas? Reproaching whom? Hendry or herself?

"I'm sorry," she said mechanically. "I'm sorry, Hendry."

He only glowered.

She wasn't really sorry; she said the words but all they meant as she said them was "I apologize," which wasn't like being sorry from the heart. He knew it. Nobody in the family apologized for anything.

But sometimes they were sorry. Somebody on New Year's morning had said, "I'm sorry," and meant it. Sorry. Sorry. Toad, I'm sorry from my heart. Wee Willie, I love you. You know that. But I forgot you for a little while and I'm sorry. I won't again.

Lydia screamed from above, "Is the house on fire?"

"No, it isn't!" bawled Hendry as furiously as if she had accused him of arson. "For God's sake, can't I burn up a little old trash in the fireplace without everybody—"

"You certainly can't," said Lydia. "It smells foul. Put it out this minute. Put sand on it. What do you think that shovel and pail in the corner of the hall are for? It'll be good practice for you. We have to get new sand anyhow, Canfield has been after it and he ought to be ashamed of himself, cashing in on a national crisis. Put the fire out, Hendry, don't just stand there."

"Okay!" he shrieked. "Okay, okay, okay!"

He broke into strangling sobs and rushed out of doors.

19

"And which kind did he like best?" asked Miss Lark with spots of excited pink in her heavy cheeks.

"The gooseberry," answered Edwina wearily.

Miss Lark nodded so hard that it was painful to watch her. Some day she would find herself sitting with her head in her lap and wouldn't that be a shock to her.

"That was Papa's favorite, too. He said it had taste to it. I've copied the recipes for you, my dear. I thought you might like to have them. I'm making a collection for you of Mamma's best recipes, the fruit cake and the Indian pudding. Dr. Theriault is very fond of the fruit cake. It isn't too rich. And the chicken pie. Of course you have your own favorite recipes, I'm sure, but I thought perhaps you'd want some tested ones that men seem to like particularly."

The impulse to snub her was almost uncontrollable. Almost. But not quite.

"That's very kind of you, Miss Lark."

Now for heaven's sake let me go upstairs away from you. I'm tired to death. Can't you see that I'm tired to death?

"You do look rested," said Miss Lark with gentle satisfaction. "Being with your friends," a touch of roguishness, "was

what you needed. I was certain of it."

If she had leered, Edwina could not have disliked her more.

"I didn't look for you before Sunday night, my dear, but it will be a pleasure to me to have you here on Easter. I do love going to church on Easter morning, don't you? Everybody always looks so happy. I hope it doesn't rain on all the new hats. I asked Mrs. Theriault if she thought it would be unpatriotic to buy a new Easter hat in wartime and she asked the Doctor and he made a little joke about it, he is so witty, he said he thought it was the duty of women in wartime to provide men with something to laugh at."

Edwina arranged her mouth in a grudging smile.

Now may I go upstairs, please?

"I've had a fearfully busy week," said Miss Lark, speaking quickly to hold her. "I re-potted all the ivies; they were root-bound; and I had the dressmaker here to alter my striped wool and make some cotton dresses for summer. She does beautiful hand work. I wondered—I know you buy most of your dresses—but I wondered if perhaps for this summer, in case it should be a special summer for you, you mightn't like her to make you some special things—"

She faltered. Hinting was difficult for her. Her top-heavy head attempted to nod and shake simultaneously to express at once her affectionate helpfulness and her reluctance to pry.

"I don't know what sort of summer I shall have," said Edwina, "or where I shall be or what I shall need."

Her voice was a slap for all her determination to be polite. She saw the effect of it. There she went again, doing what after the clash with Hendry she had sworn she would never do again. Whatever her private distress was, she must not take it out on innocent bystanders.

"You see," she said patiently, "I can't spent the summer

with Lucas. He'll be in training. We're to be married the first week-end in May and I shall come back here to finish the school term and if the trustees decide to hire married women, because of the war, and if I'm given a new contract, I shall be on your hands next winter and the winter after that and every winter until the war is over."

She remembered to add, "If you will have me."

"Oh, my dear!" breathed Miss Lark. "Oh, you poor dears, both of you. Only a week-end. But perhaps the war will be over soon. I do pray so. I do think you are wonderfully brave. I don't say much; there's so little one can say; but I have known ever since New Year's what you must be suffering."

Edwina was tempted to laugh and say, "Yes, having seen him, you know what I must be suffering. Very shrewd of you."

"Meeting him," breathed Miss Lark, "has made it all real to me. Of course I saw him for just those few moments, but he made a very strong impression on me, so intensely alive, and so attractive and young; you both are, and I've grown very fond of you, my dear; and I feel now as if I had someone in the war. When I read in the paper about the hardships and the danger and the wonderful courage and endurance, I think of him, I know he isn't in it yet, but he will be. Oh, my dear, I do pray that it will be over soon."

And now, thought Edwina, now, please, may I go upstairs?

She murmured an excuse and escaped.

It was a relief when school opened on Monday morning. There was more talk about try-outs for the spring play than about the war.

She had a letter from Lucas that said he was working like the devil and he loved her. She wrote back that she had her

new contract and that the forsythia was out.

Miss Lark came home from a church fair with six minute tea napkins, hemstitched, and three finger towels, pink, yellow, and blue.

"Not a present, my dear. Just a tiny something that won't take up any space in a trunk, and so handy to have."

"Yes," said Edwina, "thank you," and accepted them grimly. She would not be rude. She would not be hateful. Miss Lark was attending showers for Mamma's Sunday School girls and naturally it put ideas in her head. The kitchen showers excited her most. She began paying regular visits to the hardware store. She developed a passion for gadgets.

"I had no idea that such clever things had been invented, Miss Voorhis. Now just look at this. It's for slicing green beans very fine. Papa always insisted that they be cut very fine; he said they were more digestible and retained more flavor because they didn't require such long cooking. I bought one for Winifred; the other is for you. Oh, it isn't a present. Do have it. Is Mr. Pancoast fond of green beans?"

I used to like her, thought Edwina. I used to think she was funny and sweet. She's a dodo. She ought to be extinct. She's the sheltered life. I wish she would let me alone.

There was no stopping her.

"But I'm not going to keep house anywhere until after the war, Miss Lark, and I can't let you spend so much money on me."

"Oh, please," coaxed Miss Lark, "it was only a quarter and I bought one for Winifred, too. The man says it will shell them in half the time."

She brought home tiny gadgets and larger ones, not real presents, she pleaded, just little things to tuck away and use

sometime; presents, to her, meant engraved silver and embroidered linen and the heavy costly kind of cut glass that Mamma had had, the kind that frightened you out of your wits to wash, because it was so expensive and slipped out of soapy hands so easily.

She brought home parers, corers, graters, squeezers, choppers, sifters, grinders, always in pairs, one for Edwina, one for Winifred who stowed hers away on a shelf and continued to do the kitchen chores with a small sharp knife.

Spring was two weeks ahead of time, everyone said. Just look at the forsythia. Look at the maples. Imagine tulips so early, whoever heard of such a thing, you'd think it was May.

Miss Lark confided to Edwina that for the first time in her life she was having a little trouble with Winifred.

"I can't make her understand about sugar, Miss Voorhis. Mamma always bought it by the barrel and Winifred simply won't look at me when I try to explain about rationing to her. I cut some honey and corn syrup recipes out of the paper and when I showed them to her she thought I was being critical of her cooking; she said Papa was satisfied with the way she cooked and that I ought to be; she sulked for a whole day."

The yards along School Street came to life. The lawns grew green. The little white dog watched for Edwina to pass and barked at her vindictively four times a day. Once she walked over chalk marks on the sidewalk and recognized the familiar pattern of hopscotch.

Lucas wrote often. He didn't have much to tell her except that he loved her. No news. There were no letters from Hendry to give her news. There would be no more letters from Hendry, full of zest and lacking punctuation. Once in a while she looked at the mutilated album which she kept in the bot-

tom drawer of the bureau along with the tea napkins and the finger towels and the kitchen gadgets.

She thought a good deal about that April of her senior year in highschool when she had stayed with the Wilkinses after her father's death. She was constantly being reminded; school, and home work, and knitting, and companionship forced upon her by the cheerful and elderly, and nothing to look forward to; the same routine, the same sense of complete isolation, everything much the same now as it had been in that other April, except that then she had felt deep grief and now she felt nothing.

The grief had lasted a long time and so had the sense of being cut off from love. The Wilkinses had been good to her. They had treated her like a young niece, a member of the family, someone for whom they felt responsibility and real affection. More than just sorry for her. Really fond. They had kept her with them not only until she finished her last year of highschool but on through the summer. They had said it was nice to have someone young in the house.

Why on earth had they been so good to her? She had had no claim upon them. They had liked and respected her father and back in the dark ages her mother and Miss Louella had taught for a few years in the same grammar school in the same small town, before Miss Louella went to keep house for her brother.

Kind good insufferable people. They had tried Edwina to distraction as Miss Lark was trying her now.

"You're so calm, my dear," Miss Lark said over and over. "I do marvel at you. I do believe I'm more excited about your getting married than you are yourself."

I shouldn't be surprised, Edwina thought.

When Miss Lark came trotting along School Street to meet

her in the afternoon after school, as sometimes happened, and held out a letter, saying archly, "I thought you would like to have it as soon as possible. Of course I can't imagine from whom it is, but I couldn't help noticing the very distinguished handwriting," Edwina wanted to ask, "Distinguished by what?" but all she ever said was, once, "Yes, his handwriting, like his spelling, is highly individual," and all she could think of was Miss Louella being skittish about Bert Honeywell. She wondered why she had ever thought Miss Lark an improvement on Miss Louella. There was very little difference between them except in the arrangement of their hair, the fact that Miss Lark wore a thick mass of puffs and braids to protect her head from contact with reality while Miss Louella had had a frowsy bob which she crimped with a hot iron and which looked as if the moths had gotten into it.

It was hard to take kindness from people you couldn't be fond of. If you couldn't live with people you loved, how much more comfortable it was to live with people like the Martineaus who were so busy or preoccupied that they overlooked you altogether.

"I've been talking to Dr. Theriault about hiring someone to take you to Midas Junction," said Miss Lark, "and my dear, it's all arranged. You're to go in his car, and his nephew, the one with the twins, will take you over and meet you when you return on Sunday night. He says that Martin, that's the nephew, won't mind it at all because he never goes to bed before two."

It would be impossible to offer money to a Theriault nephew.

"I can't accept a favor like that, Miss Lark. I meant to hire someone."

"But the Doctor insisted, my dear! He was only too glad,

and you could give the twins a box of chocolates. That would please Martin very much. I shall give them each a little present, too. I shall feel much more comfortable driving with someone I know, especially in the middle of the night."

"You!" said Edwina. "You're not coming to meet me, at that hour!"

"Oh, indeed, I am," said Miss Lark happily. "I shall see you onto the sleeper on Friday night and be there at the Junction to welcome you on Sunday or perhaps I ought to say Monday. Why, I wouldn't dream of letting you start off all alone with nobody to say bon voyage or to wish you joy."

She blushed and her pale eyes shone.

"Don't you remember that somebody said he trusted me to take good care of you for him?"

She put her hand up to her cushiony bosom where the cameo brooch was pinned.

"He's so attractive, my dear. I don't mean just his appearance, but his manners. I was quite dazzled. And if you will forgive my making a personal remark, even in those few moments I couldn't help seeing how deeply devoted to you he was. I know you're going to be very, very happy."

Her eyes filled.

"I do pray that the war will be soon over. It's so wicked, young men having to suffer, and everyone who loves them having to suffer, just because some people won't stay at home and behave themselves and let the world do the same. I'm glad Papa isn't alive to know about it."

She smiled at Edwina and blinked hard.

"Papa was a man of very intense feelings although he restrained them, and I have an idea that Mr. Pancoast is like that, too. I hope you never told him, I'm afraid he would

scold me, I still feel guilty that I couldn't persuade you to eat the other egg."

The silly old fool, thought Edwina and hated herself for thinking it because only since Easter had Miss Lark seemed a silly old fool. The trouble was not with Miss Lark.

This house had one great advantage over the Wilkinses'. A closed bedroom meant privacy. There had been no privacy around Miss Louella. What are you doing cooped up here by yourself, dearie? Home work? Come out and do it on the dining room table and have a piece of hot gingerbread, I just took it out of the oven.

No privacy even for tears.

No tears this April, but privacy in the evenings when she said she had papers to correct or letters to write.

Writing to Lucas was hard. She had nothing to say.

When she saw him again and heard his voice and he took her in his arms, she would be all right. She would have to be. She was going to marry him on the day she saw him again and he wasn't going to be fooled by passive acceptance, or satisfied with it, either. He would think she was trying to punish him; that she was vindictive and petty; as if she could be so small, and especially at such a time! Or he might think she was frigid. He would be disappointed in her and glad to leave her. He would leave her, not caring much if he never came back. He couldn't take disappointment. She didn't want to disappoint him or let him go away from her unsatisfied and unhappy. He was reckless enough without unhappiness to make him more so.

And she wanted to love him! She didn't want to go on like this for months and years with a stone in her breast!

The aloneness after her father's death had gone on too long.

Years. The trouble had been with herself. She was timid with strangers. She didn't make friends out of acquaintances unless they came more than halfway. She had worried a good deal, too, about keeping her grades up because of the scholarships; she had worked very hard; it hadn't all been worry and work, of course; some parties and dances; some fun, but always, no matter how many people were around her, a sense of isolation, being cut off from intimacy and from love, of having nobody who belonged to her or to whom she belonged.

It had taken a long time, too long, for the sense of isolation to wear off. There wasn't time for it to wear off now!

I must get over it, she told herself. I must get myself over it before May. There is nobody who can help me. I must do it myself.

Suddenly, because looking at her calendar, she saw how few days were left in April, suddenly, because she was a little desperate, she let herself think of Francy.

Francy had broken through that isolation. It hadn't really worn off of itself. Francy had reached out to her and kept seeking her out, and she hadn't had to. Why had she done it? To talk about herself and her experiments in love, yes, but she had plenty of friends; she made friends quickly; she had had plenty of people to confide in.

She liked me, thought Edwina. She seemed to. And I liked her. I didn't like her experiments, though. I was glad when she married.

"I look as if I were dying. Well, I am. Bleeding to death inside."

Leaning to the mirror, fragile and long-backed in that clinging nightgown, arranging the brown curls on her forehead, spreading lipstick, fastidiously, yet listlessly, to widen

and brighten the mouth that Lydia said was a falling-in-love mouth. What had Lydia meant by that? That Francy looked to her like the kind of woman whose husband shouldn't stay away from her too long?

"Bleeding to death inside."

Unhappiness so profound that it poisoned her disposition and her judgment and made her hateful to everybody and made her say harsh and unfair things.

"You're not very much in love with Lucas, are you? I suppose you think you are, but you aren't, you know."

Hateful unfair things. She hadn't believed what she said. She had wanted to hit out and hurt because she was hurting inside.

"You're pretty cold-blooded, aren't you? You aren't capable of being in love."

Or had she believed that, really? Was that what had made her treachery possible?

"Doubtless you're just as well off. You'll never know what you're missing."

Condescending, patronizing. Why? Simply because she had lived with a man, and Edwina had not? More than one man. Several before Scott. Brief experiments. And after Scott—

But how could she, if she loved her husband? "A falling-in-love kind of mouth," Lydia said. "Or perhaps love isn't what I mean."

But if she had loved Scott deeply, and she had seemed to, how could she so quickly have turned to someone else? In order to forget him? Perhaps. Perhaps, since New Year's, there had been other men.

And I pitied her, Edwina thought in contempt and bitterness, with some of the contempt directed at herself for her

stupid ingenuousness. I kept saying, Poor Francy, poor Francy. Well, that makes us even. I pitied her, and in September she pitied me, and both of us were wrong. That should teach me to have nothing more to do with pity. It's just a way of making yourself feel fortunate or superior. A kind of patronage.

But neither of us was wholly wrong. Because she did love Scott, I know she did, she was wild with joy when she thought he was coming home to her, and now, whatever she's done to cut herself off from him, she must be in hell.

And the things she said to me about myself, that weren't true when she said them, are all true now.

But I'll get over this! I'll love him again. I must!

On Wednesday of the last week of April she came home from school to find a letter from Francy, two sentences only, on thick white paper engraved at the top with an address she knew well.

"Edwina, please stop in when you come down this weekend. I must see you."

On Thursday, at ten in the evening, Lucas phoned.

"Miss Voorhis, oh, Miss Voorhis, it's long distance for you, I'm almost certain that it's Mr. Pancoast, I may be wrong but I think it is he."

She said, "Hello?" and heard his voice, certainly his although it was small and light and seemed to float over the wire, "Hello yourself and a Happy May Day to you, too. Whom did you wish to speak to?"

"Lucas!" she said. "Are you tight?"

"Certainly."

And why? she wondered.

"Lucas, did you fail your exams?"

"There is no such word as fail," he answered airily, "and who is speaking, please? I want to speak to the Queen of the May."

He talked the same way when he was perfectly sober so that was nothing to go on.

"Lucas, did you pass your exams, all of them?"

"Certainly."

But he never got tight, as most people did, to celebrate. So why?

"Waiting," he said, "is what gets me down. So I'm going to sleep all through tomorrow and when I wake up you'll be here. You're coming, Wee Willie?"

So that was why. He had been afraid.

"Yes, I'm coming."

"Don't be late," he said.

She could ask him something she couldn't have asked if he had been sober. When he woke up, he wouldn't remember that she had asked.

"Lucas. Have you seen Francy recently?"

There was complete silence. She waited.

"Lucas. Did you hear what I said?"

"No."

"You didn't hear me?"

"I haven't seen her."

"That's all I wanted to know. I'm glad you called me. I was going to call you. At least I was thinking about it."

Dead silence. Was that what he had been afraid of? That she would call at the last moment and disappoint him? Again?

"Lucas. I wouldn't disappoint you again. I'll never disappoint you if I can help it."

I mean that. I mean it. I want to love you. I want to be what you want me to be.

Still silence. She wondered if he had fallen flat. But then he spoke clearly and rather loudly in her ear, as if he weren't tight at all, as if he were very close by, standing in Miss Lark's parlor, perfectly sober. "Toad, I've been trying to remember what I called you up to ask. What were you going to call me for?"

"I just wanted to hear your voice," she said.

And now she had heard it, and it hadn't made any difference. But when she saw him again and he put his arms around her, she would be all right. She would have to be!

"Toad."

"Yes, darling," she made herself say darling.

"I love you. That must be why I called you up. To tell you that."

"Yes, darling."

"Do you love me?"

"Yes, darling."

I don't love anybody. But when I see you, I'll come to life again. I'll do my best. I want to love you. Not only for your sake. For my own.

"Now I can sleep," his voice said in her ear, small again and floating. "Now I can go to sleep and when I wake up you'll be here. You're the only person I ever want to wake up with. Goodnight, my darling."

She hung up the receiver.

The next time she saw him would be the day she married him. If seeing him didn't bring her heart to life, she would have to go ahead with the marriage anyway. She couldn't go back on him at the last moment. She couldn't do that to him. And perhaps marriage, actual possession, the act of love, would work some wonderful transfiguration. It was supposed to, wasn't it?

20

SHE was the last passenger to step off the train, and he was in a cold sweat before he saw her. But there she was. There she really was, smiling at him, very calm, very pretty, in a yellow dress, with a little round brown straw hat on the back of her head and her pretty crinkly hair rolled smooth and neat.

"Did you just wake up?" she asked. "I wasn't sure you'd be here when I got off. I thought I might have to come to the dorm to dig you out."

"Oh, you did!" he said. "You did, did you!"

He kissed her, missing her mouth. He wasn't usually clumsy about kissing her. But nervousness made anybody clumsy.

"I had to take a chance on the right flowers," he said. "I didn't know what you would be wearing. That's what I called you up to ask and then I couldn't remember what I had called up for. So I took a chance on yellow roses because you always liked them."

He had a cab waiting and the flowers were in the cab. His hands shook, opening the box. There was a long bronze-headed pin and he stabbed his thumb when he pinned the

buds on her dress. It wasn't the dress she had worn on that Sunday, the week before Easter, the one she said she had bought before Christmas to be married in. He was glad it wasn't.

"Miss Lark was shocked," she said, "when I told her I'd worn this dress all last summer; she thought it ought to be something brand new; but she felt a little better when I said you were fond of it. You probably don't remember ever having seen it, but I had to satisfy her. She's terribly excited about our getting married. She drove to the Junction with me last night to see me off and I was afraid she'd have a stroke."

"You don't seem much excited," he said. He said it lightly, and was surprised at the way her eyes leaped up and dropped again, quick and almost frightened. He didn't want her to be frightened.

"But I am," she insisted. "I didn't sleep at all last night, and this morning I was all thumbs getting dressed. I hope I don't look as if I had dressed in a berth."

"Sweet," he said. Why didn't she get into the cab? "In with you, Wee Willie."

He told the driver where to go.

He settled back. Her hand was warm in his.

"I didn't sleep any last night, either," he said.

"Why not?"

"You guess."

She was watching the back of the driver's head. She said, "But I thought you were tight enough to sleep through until this morning. I thought that was the idea. To sleep away the time, because waiting is what you can't stand. Or weren't you tight when you called me up? Was it just an act, like the

time you bumped into me and said something about the immoveable object?"

He wished she hadn't reminded him of that, or herself, either. He began to talk fast, "Oh, I was fatigue-drunk, mostly. It was the first time I'd had to worry about exams and the first time I ever worked so hard that I reached a point of being too tired to sleep when the strain was over. But after I talked to you on the phone, I was fine and I didn't have to go ahead and get really plastered."

The cab lurched, throwing her against him, and he put his arm around her. There she was, close to him, real. In a little while she would be married to him. Before many hours she would belong to him completely.

"Don't crush my flowers," she said. She was being very cool about this day and what it was to mean to them. Very very cool.

"They're beautiful," she said.

He was glad she was pleased with them. He had called her up to ask what flowers she wanted, and then he had forgotten to. Her question about Francy had driven everything else out of his tired mind. Frightened him.

Her taking so long to get off the train had frightened him.

"I was in a cold sweat before you got off the train, Wee Willie. I began to think you hadn't come."

"It was jammed," she said, "and everybody was bigger than I was, and I didn't want to be trampled, so I waited till everyone else was off. Are the family coming for your graduation?"

"Yes. Monday. They're sorry to miss you. They sent you their love. I haven't seen them since Easter. Haven't had time. But Lyddy called up this morning and said they all sent love."

"Hendry, too?"

"Why, of course. She didn't specify. But of course he sent his love."

She opened her handbag and searched around in it. She brought out something. A pebble. Just an ordinary gray pebble.

"What's that?"

"A lucky stone. Hendry found it last summer, the day of the corn roast. He gave it to me to keep. The stripe makes it lucky, like a rabbit's foot."

He hadn't even noticed the stripe.

"I brought it with me," she said, "to keep the train from being late. The war makes most trains late."

She was half serious and half in fun, or else it was the little dent in her cheek, only one cheek, that made her seem so, as if even when she wasn't smiling she soon would be. She was sweet, and wonderfully serene. Well, he was thankful she wasn't nervous. He was nervous.

The cab was passing the Martineaus' house. She said, "Why, they're at home! You didn't write me. Listen! There's her cello. We must go and call on them, Lucas."

"Yes," he said. "We will. But not today."

"Not today," she agreed.

The church was only a block beyond the Martineaus'. She was still holding the striped stone in her hand.

"You're not going to hold that while you speak your piece?" he asked. "You aren't that superstitious, are you?"

She dropped the stone into her bag.

"There isn't any doubt about us, you know."

"I know," she answered.

She went directly to a window and stood looking out while he shut the door and locked it.

"There's a lovely view from up here," she said. "I always thought there must be."

The coolness of her voice was a shock to him. Anybody would think it was an everyday occurrence for them to walk into a bedroom at the Crown and lock the door on the world. Or a bedroom anywhere. She couldn't be that cool. She was putting it on. But she didn't have to. Not any more.

"Yes," he said and went over and put his arms around her, standing behind her so that all he could see was the top of her round brown hat, "it's a lovely view."

"I'm glad we're up so high."

He pulled down the window shade. There was more than one way of turning early afternoon into night. In the half darkness she turned and pressed her face against his breast.

"How about taking your hat off and staying a while?" he asked at last.

He lifted his hand to take it off for her and touched the shiny straw and dropped his hand again, remembering something he didn't want to remember, hating himself for thinking of it at such a moment.

He turned quickly and drew down the shades at the other two windows. He switched on a lamp. When he looked at her again she was holding her hat by the elastic ribbon as if she didn't know what to do with it, and she was his little toad, his darling, in a yellow dress that she said she had had last summer and now it did look familiar to him. Her hair was smooth, rolled up and back from her face, and there was no red line where the hat marked her forehead. It hadn't touched her forehead. It wasn't a cartwheel of magenta felt, it was brown shiny straw, and she dangled it by the elastic band and it bounced gently.

She had never looked so beautiful to him or so dear. He had never loved her so much. He had forgotten her once, and

it was punishment to be forced to think of that at a time when he wanted to think of her and himself and their love for each other, and nothing else.

He said a little roughly, "Let me take it," and took the hat and tossed it to the bed, and then said quickly, "No. Not there," and picked it up again and carried it to the bureau to place it in the exact center of the polished top.

"Now the room looks inhabited," he said, and laughed because his hands were trembling. "Look. My hand's shaking."

"I hope it isn't delirium tremens," she said.

"It isn't even delirium. It's better. It's real."

He picked her up and kissed her hard and set her down again, gently.

"Nine o'clock in the morning is a most irregular time to be married," he said, "but the marriage was regular enough and now it's afternoon. We could just as well pretend it was night, couldn't we, darling?"

"I don't know why not," she answered coolly.

She couldn't possibly be as cool as that.

There was a dressing table with a triple mirror. She went and sat before it and began taking the pins out of her hair. When it was loose it stood out in a dark gold cloud, making her face small. He could see her face in the mirror. She was looking into her own eyes. They were so dark and her face was so small and white that he had a sudden sense of strangeness, as if she were someone he had never seen before. Not his toad. A strange girl in a strange room, making herself at home and unaware of his presence.

As if she were alone.

If he could see her reflected face, she must be able to see his. Why wouldn't she look at him? Her hands were busy with her hair. Her eyes were fixed on her own eyes in the

mirror, but not as if she saw herself. More as if she were looking at nothingness.

He went and stood behind her, his hands on her shoulders. He leaned to put his cheek against hers so that in the glass their faces were reflected side by side. But still her eyes would not see him.

"What very attractive people," he said. "I wonder who they are."

"I wonder," she said. She would not smile.

She wouldn't help him. Perhaps she couldn't. Her hands dropped to her lap, and under his she was passive.

"What lucky people to be alone together in a bedroom with the door locked. I wonder if they have been married long. How long do you think? An hour or two or three? Not long, I'd say."

"How can you tell?" she asked.

"Why, just look at them! Listen to them! How casual they're trying to be, and how damned polite. You can always tell when people are newly married. It sticks out all over them. Selfconscious, and a little nervous, and trying to conceal it from each other, and isn't that absurd? Because why on earth should they be nervous or try to hide anything from each other, once they're married?"

"But is that all?" she asked seriously. "Is that the only way you can tell? The selfconsciousness? And the nervousness? And the trying to be casual about it?"

"Well, usually they look gloriously happy," he said, and laughed, and straightened up. "I like your hair bushing out like that. It makes you look the way you did last summer."

It didn't, though, quite. Last summer her face had been rounder, with more color in it, the white of it a warm white and the pink a deeper sun-warmed pink, peach-colored, like

the face of a healthy little girl who had been out of doors a lot. The backs of her hands had been browner than her arms and neck. They weren't brown at all this year.

"I wish it were last summer," she said. "I wish I had married you when you wanted me to."

He swept her hair forward over her forehead and eyes.

"Don't be a little dope."

She shook her hair out of her eyes and went to her overnight case and opened it and began taking out things, brush, comb, powder box, dressing gown, slippers, a white nightdress. Silent, busy, a strange girl in a strange room, making ready for bed exactly as if she were going to bed alone. Presently she was back at the dressing table, brushing her hair that he had tousled. He took the brush out of her hand.

"I like it tousled," he said.

He drew her up against him, hoping she would lift her arms and lock them around his neck, or at least lift her eyes, make some sign of awareness or love. But she leaned back from him, resting against the circle of his arms, not against his breast. She didn't strain away. She was passive, leaning back a little.

"You're not afraid of this, are you, darling?"

She didn't answer.

"Darling, darling, there's nothing to be afraid of when people love each other. It's as natural as my holding you in my arms the way I'm holding you now."

"I'm not afraid," she said faintly, "except of disappointing you."

He laughed out loud in relief and joy.

"But you couldn't! You couldn't if you tried!"

She clung to him, straining him to her, as if she wanted

him and needed him as much as he needed and wanted her. The first time she had done that, on New Year's morning, he hadn't felt fit to touch her. But now he could.

The lovely naturalness was what he hadn't dreamed of; waking to find her head against his shoulder and her arm flung across him as if even in sleep she wanted to be sure of his nearness. It was as if they had always been married. It was what he had needed, not only the possession but the peace and contentment. He had never imagined such utter contentment and such complete peace. He was content to lie wakeful while she slept. It was enough happiness to have her there against his shoulder, where she belonged, in her natural resting place.

No more strangeness between them, ever. There couldn't be, now.

The room was very dark and he was glad. Morning was as remote as next year and old age and war and death. There was no tomorrow morning. There was only now and it belonged to them.

There would be many nights of lying down without her and waking in the dark alone and waking to daylight, wanting her. But the loneliness and the wanting would never be as bad as the last winter and spring had been because she belonged to him and he could always look forward to the next time with her. He had never done much looking forward because waiting for anything he desired very much had always been so intolerable that anticipation maddened instead of comforting.

There would be a lot of waiting and doing without in the months to come, with no comfort except looking forward.

He would have to make the most of that sort of comfort and if he didn't like it much he could damn well learn to.

The next time he woke, and he hadn't intended to sleep and was annoyed with himself for having lost those hours, it was morning. The windowshades were outlined with light and he could make out the shapes of furniture in the room. He could make out, gradually, the limp whiteness of her slip that hung over a chair, and the limp pale flatness of her stockings, and her little brown straw hat on top of the bureau, and it was the most natural thing in the world for her clothes to be strewn about in the same room with his. As if they had always shared a bedroom.

"Toad," he said. "Wake up, darling."

Her eyes opened instantly.

"You weren't asleep," he said accusingly. "Nobody could wake up that fast."

"I'm used to waking quickly. I have to. Winifred taps on the door as she goes by and she doesn't pause to find out if I've heard her."

"I tried to wake you once," he said, "just by staring at you but I got no results."

She didn't ask when.

"I knelt down by the bed and put my head on the pillow beside you, just where my head is now, and I put my arm around you, just where my arm is now, and you didn't so much as stir. It was disappointing."

She was lying as still as she had lain that morning, unresponsive and unaware. She seemed less completely his than while she had slept in the darkness. She was fully awake but something of her had escaped him, and his wonderful peace and contentment had escaped him, too.

"Come back," he said.

"I haven't gone anywhere."

"Yes, you have."

"I'm here."

She turned her face and he kissed her but her lips were unresponsive, accepting willingly, giving him nothing. He raised himself on his elbow to lean over her, looking down into her eyes.

"You mustn't go away from me, you know. You must stay with me or else take me with you."

She said nothing.

"Toad. Do you love me?"

After a moment she said "Yes," but she shut her eyes when she said it.

"And whose are you?"

"Yours," she said, but not as if she meant it. Ritualistic questions and she knew the answers and gave them with her lips and only her lips.

"Are you sure about that? If there is any lingering doubt in your mind I'll be more than glad to convince you. Nothing I'd rather do."

She didn't smile. She lay so quiet that she hardly seemed to breathe. He had a moment of freezing panic. She didn't even now belong to him. She didn't want him. The darkness and the night had betrayed him or his own desire had. He had been too eager to believe what he wished to believe.

"Where is your heart? I can't seem to find it."

He kissed the little hollow at the base of her throat and the warm hollow between her breasts. She used to flinch and tremble when he touched her breast. He didn't want her to flinch and tremble now but he wanted something. He wanted to find her heart and quicken its beating and take possession

of it and take possession of all her thinking and breathing and feeling.

She must want what he wanted. She must! If she loved him, she must.

She was too new to marriage, that was all it was. Given time— But there wasn't time. They might not be together again for many weeks.

He would have to be patient. He didn't know how to be patient. He was frightened. The strangeness was between them again, cutting her off from him. He stared at her, feeling it as he had felt it when she first sat at that same dressing table, loosening her hair. She was putting her hair up now, rolling it over her finger, pinning the roll into place. From where he sat he could see only her profile, her straight high forehead, her little tip-tilted nose, her firm chin, less familiar to him, somehow, than her full face. Very pretty. Oh, very pretty, reminding him of his little toad.

Reminding him.

She had finished putting up her hair. She was dressed for the street. Her brown bag and gloves were on the bureau beside her hat. She sat at the mirror, staring into it, her hands in her lap. No, she wasn't looking at herself. She was looking at the top of the dressing table. There was nothing there to look at. A comb. A brush. An open powder box. A flat pink puff.

She was just sitting there, looking at nothing, as if she didn't want to turn and look at him.

"Didn't it mean anything to you?" he asked.

She turned to him sharply, questioning with her eyes.

"Did you suppose I wouldn't know?" he asked.

To his horror she began to cry. She put her hands up to

her cheeks and the tears slid down into her fingers. He reached her in two strides and picked her up and sat down in the one chair that was large enough for both of them.

"Don't cry about it. For God's sake don't cry, darling. You're too new to it, that's all. You'll like being married when you have time to get used to it."

But there wasn't any time.

"I wanted to make you happy and I've disappointed you," she said. "I wanted to make you happy."

"You have, darling, you have! I expected too much of you."

"No, you didn't," she said.

"Well, don't worry about it, darling. The next time will be better."

But how could he ever convince her of that?

"I'll never be better," she said. "I'm no good to you. You don't know what I've been like, ever since—"

She stopped. Her tears had stopped, too, as abruptly as they had started.

"Ever since when, Edwina?"

She slid from his lap and went to the bureau and picked up her hat. With her back to him she said, "I had a note from Francy, asking me to stop in and see her. She's at the apartment. What does she want of me? Do you know?"

He could hardly fail to get the connection.

So he had done this to himself. Yes, and to her.

"I wouldn't know," he said grimly. "How would I know? I haven't seen her. I didn't know she was still in this part of the country."

He couldn't bear to have her stand like that with her back to him as if whatever trouble was in her face might be too bad for him to see and share.

This was the day they had looked forward to. It was to have been the happiest for both of them that either of them had known.

He swung her around to face him. She had dried her eyes. The eyelids weren't even reddened. There was no sign that she had cried. There was no sign of any trouble in her face. Trouble or anything else. She looked as if nothing could touch her heart or ever had.

"Can't you forget about her, darling? I told you, I begged you not to think about what happened. I told you it had nothing to do with what you and I feel for each other. We love each other. We're married to each other."

Panic chilled him as it had earlier when she lay quiet under his hands and his kisses. Perhaps she really had stopped loving him. But she didn't hate him, either. She hadn't shrunk from his touch.

She was looking down at the shiny round straw hat, turning it in her hands. Yesterday she had stood holding it by the elastic ribbon that went under her hair to keep the hat in place. They were no closer, really, he and she, than they had been then. It was as if the night had never been. She had given herself to him willingly but the will to love wasn't enough.

"You said I wasn't to care," she said. "And I haven't. I don't. I don't care about anything, or anybody. I shouldn't have married you. I've disappointed you. I'm no good to you or to myself or to anybody. You'll come to hate me."

"No, I won't!" he said.

"People do. I expect Francy hated Scott when he told her he didn't want her any more. I expect that's how she could have turned to someone else so quickly. I wonder if it makes a difference to her, knowing that he probably couldn't help

being cruel to her?"

She put the hat on and picked up her gloves and bag.

"I might as well stop in and see her for a minute sometime later in the day. You won't mind, will you?"

He said nothing. If she didn't mind seeing Francy, he was in no position to protest.

21

BUT later in the day, at the outer door of the apartment house, he said, "Don't do it, Edwina. Don't go in. Please don't."

She was surprised. If she didn't mind, why should he?

"I'll only go in for a moment," she said. "Five minutes at the most. I'm curious to know what she wants. She knew I'd be down this week-end. I suppose she couldn't miss hearing or reading in the paper that your class would be graduated next Monday and she took it for granted that I would come down."

She rang the bell.

"It seems a little cool, her asking to see me. But she probably thinks I'm much too sensible to be squeamish. She always said I was sensible. So I might as well be."

"Toad," he said, "give it up. Please. Don't see her."

"It can't possibly do any harm," she answered. "If she thinks I don't know about Christmas week, I shan't say anything to enlighten her. I won't stay more than five minutes. You'll wait for me, won't you?"

He was angry. His forehead was dark red. He always looked redder than other people because his hair and eye-

brows were so fair.

"I'll wait for you!" he said. He marched out of the vestibule and down the three steps to the sidewalk. Whether he was angry with her, or with Francy, for writing to her, or with himself, she had no idea and she didn't in the least care.

There was a click and she grasped the inner door and pushed. It was a very heavy door. How like him, when he was in a rage, not to stay with her long enough even to open the heavy door.

She started the long climb upward. She wondered a little at her obstinacy. He used to say she was obstinate. But she didn't care about seeing Francy. She didn't care one way or the other.

At the second landing she stopped to get her breath. She had wanted to get away from him for a breathing space. That's why she was here. Until she had reached the familiar vestibule, where they had waited so many times together for Scott or Francy to answer the bell and push the button that released the door, she hadn't decided whether or not she would actually ring. She might not have if he hadn't burst out in protest.

It hadn't all been perversity, though. She had wanted to get away from him for a little while.

Tonight she would be taking the sleeper back to Midas and she might not see him again for weeks and weeks.

Doggedly she climbed the last two flights. She went too fast and at the top her knees were water. She had to sit down on the top step whether it came off on her yellow skirt or not. She leaned her head against the wall.

What a fool she had been to hope that a marriage night could work some miracle for her. As if an experience of the flesh could bring with it some emotional transfiguration.

"You're too new to it, that's all. You'll like being married when you have time to get used to it. I expected too much of you."

Blaming himself.

I'd rather he hated me, she thought.

He would, eventually. But it might take a long time for him to believe that she didn't love him. Once he had been too ready to believe that when it wasn't so, and now, because she had gone ahead and married him, he would keep on hoping and trying to reach her heart.

She had done a frightful thing in going ahead with it. But how could she not have taken that one chance? She had been afraid not to take it because her worst mistakes with him had been the result of fearfulness and caution.

If I had married him a year ago, she thought, or last September, or any time this spring, I wouldn't be like this. If I had married him and found out afterward about Francy, I wouldn't have been like this. I would have felt something. I would have hated her. But I would have gone on loving him. I would have loathed his having had her, but I could have accepted the idea, gradually, and realized that it didn't count for anything because he doesn't love her. He loves me. If he loved her, he could have married her instead of me. She's free. She isn't Scott's wife any more.

I thought of it, didn't I, early in the spring? I thought there might have been someone. When he said there had been, I hated her without knowing who she was; I didn't want to know. But I still loved him.

I guess I didn't really believe it until I knew who she was. Finding out that it was Francy made it real.

He said I wasn't to think about it and I wasn't to care. And I didn't care. I didn't let myself think about her. But even

when I did think about her, I couldn't care.

Perhaps when I see her and hear her voice—

Well. That's what I'm here for, isn't it? To see her. So what am I waiting for? I'm afraid to see her. I'm afraid of being hurt. Or maybe I'm afraid I can't be hurt. I'm afraid to stick a knife into my breast. I don't want to bleed to death. But it would be worse if I couldn't bleed and the knife blunted its edge against a stone.

Somewhere a door swung open, a tiny sound in the corridor at her back. She started up. It was Francy's door, at the far end of the long hallway, and Francy was standing in the open doorway.

"Is that you, Edwina? I thought it must be you."

The perfectly familiar, high-pitched, light voice.

Nothing to be afraid of. It was only Francy.

They had come along this corridor hundreds of times to see Francy and Scott. Scott was in there, waiting for them, waiting to be talked to and reassured; Francy had begged them to come over because Scott was tired and low in his mind from too much studying and too much listening to war news broadcasts.

He was in there now, and she was standing at the door to welcome them.

He wasn't in there. They had never been able to do anything for him. Nobody but his father could have reassured him and made him feel safe. And he couldn't go home and be a child again and forget the war, because other people thought his father was a crank. He had given up living by his father's rules but he had kept on trying to find peace and safety. The dairy farm experiment. The shut-in academic life. The pastoral poets. Trying to find the peace and safety he had had at home as a child with his father. He had loved his

father. Lucas said so.

There wasn't any peace and safety in a world at war, and his father was dead.

"I began to be afraid it wasn't you," said Francy fretfully. "You took your time climbing the stairs."

She stepped back a little and Edwina passed her without looking directly at her.

"I've been expecting you all day."

"I can stay only a minute," Edwina said.

She sat in a corner of the mulberry sofa. She looked at the porcelain clock on the mantel. He had picked it up and shaken it violently and set it down hard and said, "I told you it had stopped," and of course it had. But it was ticking now.

Five minutes, she told herself. Five minutes and then I'll leave. He's waiting down there on the sidewalk and he doesn't like to be kept waiting. He was very angry. With me? I wonder. I don't believe so.

"I hoped you would come," said Francy. "I wouldn't have asked you if there had been anyone else I could turn to. I was sure you would be coming down this week-end and I had to see you."

Her long skirt made a pleasant swishing sound as she moved across to the chair by the fireplace, opposite the sofa. Edwina looked at the long flowing skirt. She looked at that rather than higher. She was reluctant to look at Francy's face.

A long-skirted housecoat. The kind Francy liked. She always chose the fitted tailored kind that made her look thinner and taller than she was. She chose the colors that most women couldn't wear. She called them blue mold and rotten pink. The same colors that were in the wallpaper. She had had a time finding just the right wallpaper.

"The apartment looks beautiful, Francy," Edwina said.

She had always admired Francy's living room with the blended greens and the shiny black floor and the beautiful chairs and the wallpaper hydrangeas. At one time she had admired Francy and liked her.

"Do you still have that Swedish woman to clean for you?"

"Yes," Francy said.

It would be necessary, presently, to look up into her face. But not just yet.

"I didn't know, until I had your letter, that you weren't still in Florida. When did you come back, Francy?"

"The middle of March."

So she had been here all the spring. He could have come to see her at any time, if he had wished to. But he hadn't. He had met her, passed her, on the street just once and had hurried by.

"I didn't go through with the divorce," said Francy.

Edwina, startled, raised her eyes.

"I was ill," said Francy. "It was horrible down there. I didn't know anyone and I didn't want to know anyone but it was horrible, being alone in a strange place, and I wasn't well, so I came back here."

"Are you better?" Edwina asked.

"No, I'm not!" said Francy.

She looked well enough. She looked as she had in September; curls at the top of her narrow rounded forehead, curls at the back of her neck bunched together and tied with a narrow cerise ribbon; careful make-up; a touch of blue on her eyelids; a brighter lipstick than she had worn last summer. Her skin was blue-white but it always had been; an unhealthy color for anyone else; not for her.

Why did I ever imagine she looked like Father? Edwina wondered. She doesn't at all.

"Edwina, when does your long vacation start?"

"The end of the third week in June."

"Have you made any plans for the summer?"

The summer? No. There's a war, or hadn't you heard? I was married yesterday but I'll be alone all summer because there's a war. And perhaps it's just as well that I can't be with him. I'm no good to him or to myself or to anyone.

"I wondered if you would come and stay here with me until September," Francy said.

With you? Here?

"No, I can't," Edwina said.

"Please don't refuse!" cried Francy. "There isn't anyone else I can ask, and I can't face a whole summer here by myself. I was here all alone last summer and fall and I've been here all this spring and I loathe the place but I have to stay and I just can't face another summer in it alone!"

"But you don't have to stay," said Edwina. "You're a free agent. Why on earth should you stay here if you don't wish to?"

Suddenly she noticed Francy's hands. They were unclasped and spread out flat on her lap, small and white, with very slender fingers, surprisingly small hands for a girl of her height. She used to say that her hands and her long eyelashes were her only beauty. She had always taken exquisite care of her nails. She liked dark polish that covered them completely, with no white moons or line of white at the outer ends.

They were torn or bitten down to the quick and the tender skin around them was raw and red, not as if she had been doing rough work in the fields or the kitchen but as if she had torn her own flesh with her teeth.

She saw Edwina's glance, and shuddered, and hid her hands

in the folds of her skirt.

"If you don't like being by yourself," Edwina said, "why don't you hire a companion? Or a nurse, if you aren't well?"

"I don't want strangers with me! I don't want people who will wonder about me and ask questions! You know all there is to know about me, and I'm used to you, you're all the family I have!"

"But that isn't true. You have your mother to go to if you want somebody who belongs to you."

"I can't go and stay with Mother! She's settled with Aunt Frances, and Aunt Frances and I always fought like wildcats whenever she visited us. She never approved of me and she'll be glad when she hears that my marriage has broken up."

Her great eyes were tormented. It was curious to look full into them and feel no pity. Probably all her life when she had wanted something, she had used those soft imploring eyes and convinced her father and mother and everybody that she was suffering the tortures of the damned. It was curious, too, that a prominent forehead and chin, which were supposed to give to any face an appearance of intelligence and will power, gave her face no appearance of either.

"Edwina, do you know about Scott?"

"Yes."

"I've seen him," Francy said. "I drove out to see his mother. That was just before I wrote to you. I wanted to find out where he was and if he'd enlisted and how he was. I couldn't stand it, not knowing anything about him. And I'd begun to think that perhaps when the war was over, if he came back, he'd want me again. I was glad I hadn't gone through with the divorce. But he won't want me again! He didn't even know me!"

"You shouldn't have gone to see him," Edwina said, appalled.

"Yes, I should have! Edwina, I'm not like his mother. She thinks he'll get well. She's just as fond of him as if he really were her child again, and he seems fond of her. The doctor's going to let her take him home and take care of him there and she wants to! How can a woman be like that?"

"Perhaps he will get well, Francy."

"I don't believe it! I saw him. That isn't Scott. That isn't my husband. I never had a husband. Once this ghastly summer is over, I'm going away from here as far as I can go, I don't know where, and learn never to think of him again. I can make a decent life for myself, somehow, by myself."

"Why not go now?" Edwina asked.

"Because in September I'm going to have a child," said Francy. "I went out to Scott before Christmas. You know that. I stayed one night and then he told me he didn't want me any more. He said terrible things to me. He said he never had loved me. He made me hate him. But you can hate and love a man at the same time. I can. Only now I can't, now that I've seen him, because he isn't Scott!"

Edwina looked at her, speechless.

"One chance in a hundred. That's what they told me, do you remember, all those precious specialists I went to when I was living with Scott, and happy, and wanted a child because I thought it would please him and please that horrid old father of his? But I didn't have one. And now I haven't any husband and I don't want a child but I have to have one because I'm too much of a coward to have an abortion; women die sometimes, having those, and I don't want to die; I want to live through the summer and get rid of this and go

away and belong to myself and never, never to any man again."

"Get rid of it!" Edwina said. "Get rid of it?"

"There are always people who want to adopt!" said Francy. "You didn't imagine that I would keep it! That's why I can't go to Mother and Aunt Frances. They'd think I ought to keep it. They'd try to make me."

"You'd give up your own child?" Edwina exclaimed.

"Now don't you start!" said Francy. "I won't listen. I know what I'm going to do and nothing can change me."

But your own child. If you ever loved your husband—

Edwina was on her feet. The room was darkening around her. The floor rocked under her.

I mustn't faint, she thought. Lucas is waiting for me. I mustn't be ill or I won't be able to go to him. Miss Lark won't let me go.

She heard someone speaking to her, asking something, sounding alarmed. Miss Lark.

In a moment the pain and nausea would double her up and she would faint and Miss Lark would make a fuss and send for the doctor.

But this wasn't real pain. Not in her body. This was an idea, tearing her mind apart. This wasn't flu and Christmas was long since past and Lucas was waiting for her but not to marry her because she was already married to him.

"It isn't Scott's child. Is that why you don't want to keep it?"

That was her own voice, asking, when there was no need to ask. She knew the answer.

"Or don't you know whose child it is?"

And that was worse. Even when he was born, no one would know for certain. He might not look like anyone ex-

cept himself. Even when he was Hendry's age.

She was grasping Francy's shoulder, shaking her. She couldn't see her. The room was dark and rocking. She heard her own voice and it wasn't like her own, it was loud and harsh, like Lucas' in a rage, "You aren't fit to have a child. You aren't fit to live. Selfish, heedless, irresponsible. You never think of anything except yourself. You never think ahead to whom you may injure."

She stepped back. She could see again. She saw Francy's frightened eyes and parted lips.

"You aren't fit to live," she said again, "but you have to, whether you like it or not. Don't look so terrified. I'm not going to hurt you. I'm going to take care of you, not for your sake. I shan't fly out at you again. I shan't ask you any more questions. I'll stay with you until September because you aren't to be trusted to take decent care of yourself and now you must."

The sickness swept over her again.

How can I live through the summer, she thought wildly, close to you, saying nothing, hating you and concealing it? Hating you. Hating you.

"But I do know!" Francy said.

She would lie. Of course she would lie.

"You needn't talk to me as if I'd committed a crime," said Francy, with bitterness. "I haven't, and even if I had, I wouldn't deserve any such awful punishment as I'm getting."

But I'm the one who is being punished. Not you. It should have been my child. I've wanted him and planned for him and loved him. I could even see how he would look when he was twelve. Hendry's age, but with Lucas' face and eyes and light hair and quick kind of mind, quicker than mine, and quick temper that I would have to deal with. My child but

not like me. Not a bit like me. Like Lucas.

"You don't know how awful it's been for me all these weeks since I found out, Edwina. I couldn't believe it. It was too bad to believe. I went to a doctor down there in Florida and he said it was so and I wouldn't believe it so I came up here to one of the specialists I knew and he congratulated me! He said it did happen sometimes when a wife had been separated from her husband for several months. He expected me to be pleased about it!"

Would she have the face to talk like that, to me of all people, if it weren't Scott's child, or if she weren't sure?

She would have the face for anything.

Besides, she never believed I had enough of a heart to break. There was a time when I didn't believe it, either.

"You will come back when your school is out?" Francy was calling after her, standing in the open doorway.

"Yes, I'll come."

The corridor was long and dim and there was a window at the end of it over the stairs, an oblong of brightness that dazzled the eyes. The afternoon was half over and afternoons in early May were none too long. She must hurry, hurry, because he was waiting in the street below. He didn't like to be kept waiting.

There were men who had to marry young.

I should have understood that, she thought. I was a fool to say he should be able to wait if I could. I should have known that he wasn't in the least like Father. Some men are willing to wait. But how could I know? I didn't know anything.

I don't even know whether Francy was lying. I'm afraid to believe she was telling the truth. I want to believe it. It's too easy to believe what you want to believe. And easy to

blame someone you hate, and easy to make excuses for someone you love.

She was afraid to hurry, going down the stairs. She was afraid her high heels might catch and throw her headlong.

She was afraid not to hurry. She had been away from him too long. She had been away from him for weeks and weeks, for the whole of April, since the Sunday before Easter.

Lucas, I'm coming! Be patient a little longer.

22

SHE couldn't see him anywhere. She stood on the sidewalk in front of the apartment house and looked first one way and then the other and whimpered in her throat. There were faces passing but none was his and the street was a blur of passing cars.

She heard a long-drawn-out cry, "Edweeeeeeeeena!"

There he was on the other side of the street, signaling wildly.

She darted through the traffic. Horns tooted and someone swore at her. Lucas snatched her to the curb. It was Lucas swearing. She clutched his arm and held on.

"I thought you had left me. I couldn't see you anywhere. I didn't mean to make you wait so long."

She didn't know what she was saying.

"Come along," he said. "Let's get out of here."

He walked her rapidly along the street.

"Don't let me catch you doing that again, do you hear?" he was scolding her. "Haven't you any sense? That's the way people get killed. Do you want to be killed? You could stay alive for my sake, I should think. I happen to set some value on your life even if you don't. And haven't you any consid-

eration for the poor devils driving those cars? If you have any conscience at all, it ought to be hurting you plenty for the nervous breakdowns you've probably caused in the last few minutes. And God almighty!" he exploded. "What I can't understand is how there can be so many cars still running with rubber and gas the way it is!"

He went on muttering, walking her so fast that she had to take two steps to his one and even run a little. She didn't know where he was taking her and it didn't matter so long as he kept her with him.

He slowed.

"Going too fast for you, toad?"

"No," she said, panting. "Yes. A little."

It wasn't the pace that was taking her breath. It was the dreadful pounding of her heart that seemed to have swelled until it filled her whole body. The heavy beat was in her side and in her wrists and in her throat, choking her, and in her forehead, throbbing.

He had her hand drawn through his arm, her fingers interlaced and locked with his. He kept looking down at her with quick anxious glances and away again. What was there in her face to make him anxious? It must be there, all of it, written large, making her hideous and old with anger and grief. She felt old. Her heart was too big for her feeble body and was tearing it apart.

"I only went across the street to the drug store," he said. "I went to get a package of cigarettes. You were in there so damned long."

"I didn't mean to stay so long," it was difficult to speak, she had so little breath. Her side hurt, and her throat. "I didn't mean to make you wait so long."

The childish terror that had seized her when she couldn't

see him anywhere, and the frantic need to get to him that had sent her darting through the traffic, had passed, now that he had her hand in his, her arm pressed against his side. But she still trembled and panted; she had no control over her shaken nerves; she could not will her heart to shrink back to normal size or by any effort of will quiet its terrible pounding.

"I didn't know you could be such a little damned fool," he said fiercely, and she thought he was beginning to scold again, and she thought, dimly, that for a person who jaywalked with appalling recklessness, he was hardly the one to deliver such a lecture. Besides, there hadn't been any real risk. The cars had been moving very slowly and there hadn't been many of them. His worrying about her was something new.

"Thinking I'd left you," he muttered. "Why would I, for God's sake? I said I'd wait and I did wait but you didn't come and you didn't come. I begged you not to see her. I knew it would only make you wild. She had her nerve asking you to see her. I should think she would have had better sense; I should think you'd have had better sense than to go."

So that was his real anxiety.

She would have to tell him why Francy had sent for her. What a thing for a man's wife to have to tell him!

It couldn't be true. It was too bad to be true.

I can't tell him, she thought. How can I, possibly? I have to tell him. There isn't anyone else to do it. I'm his wife. It's up to me to do it. I'll have to tell him and ask if she lied when she said she knew, and he'll have to answer, and even before he speaks I shall know from the look on his face.

"You're all in," he had stopped short and was scowling down at her. "I'll get a cab. We'll go back to the hotel."

"Oh no! No!" she protested.

Not back there. She couldn't tell him there what she had to tell him.

"I'd rather stay out in the sun," she said. "Isn't there someplace where we can be quiet and sit down without too many people around?"

"Sure," he said.

He shortened his strides, trying not to hurry her. She realized presently where they were and what he was heading for. The little park back of the Public Library. People with no place of their own had to make the best of public places. Who should know better than he and she the public places where two people could stroll or sit and talk in lowered voices, pretending to be alone together, creating a semblance of privacy out of togetherness? The Library park, the Art Museum on stormy days, the Botanical Garden in the fall when the leaves were crimson and in the spring when the apple blossoms were out and later the lilacs. A dance at the gym, a party at somebody's house, a ride into the country in somebody's car; the Martineaus' porch when the Martineaus went to some faculty dinner; an evening at least once a week at the apartment with Scott and Francy—

The little park was deserted. Most strollers on a sunshiny May afternoon, a Sunday, would be at the Botanical.

There was a plank bench washed clean by recent rains. It was very hard but she was thankful to sit. A few late tulips, purple-red, edged the gravel walk. Some were very tall and some were stunted and there were empty places where some hadn't come up at all. There was a fountain that looked as if it had been constructed from the remains of a brownstone front.

"Cigarette?" Lucas asked.

She shook her head.

He tossed his burnt match into the brownstone basin.

"Too bad the government can't use that for scrap."

He seated himself near her on the hard bench, near enough to take her hand if she offered it, waiting for her to speak or hold out her hand. Waiting.

"Lucas. She went to see Scott's mother. She thought he had probably enlisted and she couldn't bear not knowing how he was. She had begun to hope that when the war was over he might want her again. Mrs. Collier took her to see him."

Lucas muttered under his breath.

"It must have been horrible for her, Lucas. He didn't know her."

Horrible for her. But she might at least have felt pity. Grief, at least. Not just that violent revulsion, like disgust. How could you turn with disgust from a person you had loved, no matter how altered he was? What manner of love was it that could change to disgust when disaster changed the beloved from a man to a child? You might not be able to go on loving him as a wife loved a husband, but you ought to feel something for him, tenderness, and pity, and certainly grief. Not revulsion.

"She asked me how a woman could be like Mrs. Collier, fond of Scott and wanting to take him home and take care of him when he's the way he is? But Lucas, how could his mother not be like that?"

All very well to talk about going away as far as possible and forgetting that you had ever had a husband, and making a life for yourself, by yourself, and belonging to yourself and never, never to any man again. All very well to talk. But you couldn't just blot out a part of your life. A husband or a child was a part of yourself and you couldn't just go away by yourself somewhere and pretend you had always lived to

yourself alone. You couldn't forget what had been a part of yourself.

Lucas tossed his cigarette into the fountain.

"Toad," he said, "toad darling, listen to me. Listen carefully."

He caught hold of her two hands and fixed his bright troubled eyes on her eyes, trying to hold them as he was holding her hands, by main force. Not that she wanted to draw her hands away. She wanted to keep as close to him as he would let her. But his eyes couldn't hold her eyes. He couldn't hypnotize her as he had that other time when he had told her she wasn't to be hurt and she wasn't to care.

"Look at me, toad."

She was looking at him but not into his eyes. She was noticing the familiar details of his face that she knew by heart, the way his eyebrows grew, the crispness of his crest of hair, the shape of his mouth, the color and texture of his skin. She noticed details that weren't familiar, tiny lines, tiny marks of distress and fatigue. It must have been a grueling spring for him. He had worried about getting his degree. He had worried about her. He had been afraid that at the last minute she might let him down. How frightful that people who loved each other couldn't trust each other!

But why should he have trusted her? He had been afraid she would stop loving him, and she had stopped, for a while. For weeks and weeks she had had a stone in her breast and not even the sight of him or the sound of his voice or the touch of his hands had turned the stone into a beating heart.

"Toad, you're torturing yourself and me because of something that doesn't exist. When a thing's over and done with, it's over and done with. I've told you I was sorry. I'm sorry as hell. I thought you had sense enough to put it completely

out of your mind and not go on holding it against me. I told you it didn't count. I told you it had nothing to do with you and me and what's between you and me. You and I love each other. Don't we? If you don't love me, why did you marry me? You didn't have to. You do love me, Edwina. I know you do."

Yes. Now. But yesterday? This morning? He had a right to ask why she had married him without love, but he was wrong in believing that if she hadn't loved him she wouldn't have married him. He gave her credit for more integrity than she had.

What had he done, at Christmas, that was any worse than what she had done in marrying him yesterday? She had given herself to him without love as he had taken Francy. As Francy had given herself.

She was no better than Francy. But now she loved him, and Francy didn't and Francy was going to have his child and it was wrong and wicked and unfair to all of them but most unfair of all to the child.

"I do love you and I'm your wife, but oh, Lucas, that other thing isn't over and done with. It never will be. She's going to have a child."

He dropped her hands. He turned green-white. A dreadful color.

Darling, don't mind so much. Don't look like that. I didn't want to tell you. I'm in this with you.

She wanted more than anything to take his head on her breast and comfort him and reassure him and make him understand that no matter how bad this was they could handle it together.

"She isn't fit to bring up a child, Lucas. She isn't fit to have one. She speaks of him as if he were an inanimate object, a

curse or something sent to punish her and she doesn't think she's done anything wicked enough to be punished for. She doesn't think heedlessness is a sin and maybe it isn't except when it may affect a human life and spoil it. She thinks only about herself; she's sorry for herself; she says she won't keep the baby; she says there are always people who want to adopt; she's absolutely callous about it."

Lucas, Lucas, tell me. I'm your wife. I have a right to know the truth.

Can't you say anything? One word?

You don't have to say it. Because I know. I know.

"She said it was Scott's child but of course she would say that, to me, to save her face, although she never seemed to care much about face-saving. She's always been outspoken about herself. Before she was married she used to tell me things about the love affairs she'd had. She seemed to enjoy telling me. It was almost like bragging. I suppose it makes a woman feel more valuable to know that she has been desired, and had, by several men. Especially if she isn't beautiful."

Lucas. Was she lying when she said it was Scott's child? Doesn't she know whose it is?

Was she lying when she said she knew?

Perhaps she wasn't lying. Perhaps she does know whose child it is, and she knows it isn't Scott's.

So there isn't any doubt.

"If it were Scott's child, I don't believe she could hand him over to strangers. She's still married to Scott. She didn't go through with the divorce because she found out about this. She says she will divorce him when this is over with. Maybe she will, but if she ever loved him, and I know she did, how can she give away his child? I couldn't give your

child to strangers, Lucas. I couldn't, even if I weren't his mother."

Don't look at me like that. Don't look so sick. I'm in this with you. I love you. I'm your wife. What happens to you happens to me. Together we can deal with anything, no matter how bad it is.

"But I'm wrong, I suppose, to think that just because I feel a certain way, another woman is bound to feel the same way. I keep forgetting that Francy never did want a child except to please her husband and now she feels she hasn't any husband. Seeing Scott horrified her but it didn't touch her heart; it just disgusted her; she wants to cut herself off from him and forget about him, and if she kept the child, she couldn't forget, could she?"

But it isn't his child. If it were, you would have told me before now.

You don't have to tell me. I know.

"Edwina. What you're thinking—"

"Don't say it, Lucas. You needn't. I know already."

Now that at last he could speak to her, she didn't want him to because it wasn't necessary and she had more to say. She had to reassure him and make him understand that she was big enough and brave enough to share anything with him. Anything! Where was this wonderful courage coming from?

Her swollen heart wasn't hurting her any more. Her body had grown big enough to contain it. Why, she was as tall and strong and deep of breast as any woman in the world!

"Lucas, your mother will help us. Miss Lark will help us. I know it. You're not to worry. I'm going to stay with Francy through the summer and take care of her because she won't take decent care of herself unless she's forced to, and she doesn't want her mother to know about the baby because

her mother would try to make her keep him. So it's up to me. And besides, I want to. But I shan't try to make her keep him because she isn't fit to keep him. She wouldn't be good to him. She wouldn't love him. But I will. I promise you that I will. He'll be my own from the minute he's born. I couldn't let him be brought up by strangers. No matter how many children we had, of yours and mine, I should always think about him and worry about him and want him and feel robbed if I didn't have him. It will be all right, Lucas. I can manage. If I have to be in Midas in September, when he's born, Lydia will make some arrangement. She's wonderful at arrangements. But she couldn't take him herself; you know that; she would, in a minute, but she can't, because of Hendry. It isn't the kind of thing that could be explained to Hendry. He's only half grown up. And Miss Lark will help me. You have no idea how adaptable she is. Why, right after war started she began to think about opening her house to children who might have to be sent inland from their homes if there was a bombing."

"Edwina," he said, "what you're thinking isn't true."

She heard him clearly enough. She heard, but she couldn't take in the significance of the words. Not all at once.

"It couldn't possibly be true, Edwina."

He meant that the child was Scott's child. He meant that the child couldn't possibly be his.

Not his. Scott's child.

All she felt was loss. No relief. Loss. The high emotion that had swelled her heart and made her bigger than she was went out of her too suddenly. She was a hollow shell.

He put his hand out, very quietly, and touched her shoulder, very gently, as if he were afraid to make too sud-

den a movement. She felt the warmth of his hand through her thin dress.

"I had to let you say it all, Edwina."

His hand was gentle but insistent. It brought her to him so that her head rested against him. His arm about her shoulders held her loosely but as if she belonged to him. He could be quiet and kind sometimes. He knew how to be.

She dwindled slowly. She was normal size again. She was small and weak. I couldn't have managed it, she thought. He knew I couldn't. Why did I think I could?

Where had all that wonderful courage come from?

It was all gone now. Francy's child, sharing their lives, looking at them with Francy's eyes, reminding them always. There might have been nothing of Lucas in him. Only Francy. Those brown eyes, and that long face with the prominent brow and chin.

But he would have looked like my father, she thought. I could have seen my father in him and forgotten Francy. But Lucas couldn't. He never knew my father.

It would have been worse for Lucas than for me.

"Lucas, why didn't you tell me right away?"

"I wanted you to say it all. You've got to learn to tell me what's in your mind, Edwina. If you keep resenting things in secret, you'll get wrong ideas. You'll think I'm worse than I am. Whatever you think of me, I'd rather know it. But I'm sorry to have put you through this. I'll never get over being sorry. I hate like hell to have you spend the summer the way you're planning to spend it. But I guess you can face up to anything, once you set your mind on it."

"Somebody has to make her take care of herself, Lucas. I shan't mind much. I don't have to hate her, now."

"No, darling. You don't have to hate her."

"I never hated you, Lucas. Only her."

"I hate myself," he said.

He had had a bad shock. She knew that. The dreadful way he had looked at her while she told him. But of course he had known all the time. The worst of it, for him, had been thinking, What if it hadn't been Scott's child?

A "what if" was never so bad as an actual fact. But it could be a shock.

"It seems awful for Scott's child to go to strangers, Lucas, when he has people of his own. I'm his people as much as the Colliers are. I'll have to see what arrangement I can make. Mrs. Collier couldn't take him; she's going to have Scott on her hands. But if Scott gets well, he'll want his son. I'll have to talk to Lydia. She'll be able to suggest something. There's all that Collier money."

He didn't answer, and she rebuked herself. Why should he be bothered about such a thing at such a time? She couldn't expect him to share her feeling of responsibility for a child that was neither his nor hers. A child of his own wouldn't seem real to him, probably, until it was born.

The afternoon was nearly over. They hadn't many hours left. She had to go back to Midas on the night train.

"Lucas. If we aren't too far apart this summer while you're in training, may I come to see you once or twice?"

His arm tightened about her.

"I should hope so!" he said.

The next time he locked a door to shut out the world, and turned to her, she wouldn't be standing at a window with her back to him, pretending he wasn't there. She would be holding out her arms. She would be everything that he wanted and needed. She could be!

The summer wouldn't be too bad if she could look forward

to being with him once in a while. But when his training period was over, what could she look forward to?

"How long do you think it will last?" she asked in a small voice.

"What, darling? The war? Hell, how should I know?"

Two years? Three years? Five? Loneliness, waiting, and terror. Not even knowing, most of the time, where he was. She would have to bear it. If he could do what was required of him in the next two or three or five years, she could do what was required of her. Courage had come to her a little while ago when she had needed it. Perhaps, when she needed it again, it would come again. And she could fix her mind on the end of the war. She could think ahead to peace and safety and his coming home.

"I expect you'll be different when you come home to stay, Lucas, and I'll be different, too. We'll be strange to each other at first."

"We'll get over the strangeness," he said. "Don't you fret about that."

The end of the war would be the beginning of their real marriage, the day-by-day living together, the getting used to each other, all the adjustments. It wouldn't be easy after a long separation.

But if we still love each other, she thought, we'll have as good a chance of happiness as any newly married people have.

If they still loved each other. But they must!

It was physical nearness, mostly, that kept love alive. But there must be something over and above that. There had to be something that bound lovers together, no matter how far apart they had to be or for how long. Possession might be nine points of the law of loving, but there had to be some-

thing more. Something that had been left out of Francy's love for Scott.

We have it, she told herself stoutly. We've been separated before and we still loved each other.

She remembered, suddenly, with fear, that once he had lost faith in her and forgotten her. That had happened. And she had stopped loving him for a time. That had happened.

Wasn't there any security, then, even in love?

She looked up at him, fearfully, and he smiled.

"Getting late," he said. "Shall we move along?"

No security anywhere.

Yes, there was!

You could know your own power of loving. That was security. You couldn't be sure of anyone else's love for you, but of your own love for someone else you could be absolutely sure, and that was enough. It had to be.

"Yes," she said, and stood up, and put her hand in his. "Yes, let's. I can go on now."

MARRIAGE with Lucas was not to be rushed into blindly, Edwina felt. They loved each other deeply but often they hated each other. The flame between them burned fitfully, blown bright by his explosive impatience and foolish optimism, chilled by her caution and self-restraint. She lived for the future, he for the present moment.

Pearl Harbor destroyed their future; the present, which they might have seized was lost by Lucas' recklessness. I

of how two your

UNIVERSAL
LIBRARY

138 108

UNIVERSAL
LIBRARY